

A
STUDY
IN
PREJUDICES



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A
STUDY IN PREJUDICES

BY
GEORGE PASTON
AUTHOR OF A MODERN AMAZON, ETC.

Pseud.

[Symonds, Emily Morse]

"A prejudice is a fond, obstinate persuasion,
for which we can give no reason."



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A STUDY IN PREJUDICES.

CHAPTER I.

JASPER FLEMING, the now celebrated Royal Academician, whose pictures sell even in the hardest times, and whose mannerisms are copied by so many admiring disciples, owes a large measure of his success, as every one knows, to the fact of his being a Shakespearean student and fanatic. His first hit was made with a picture called "Shakespeare's First Play," which purported to be a representation of the boy Shakespeare's first visit to the theatre at Stratford-on-Avon, when he stood between his father's knees, and studied the antics of the strolling players. This work found favour in the eyes of both critics and public, and after a Royal personage had praised it, and an American millionaire had bought it, Fleming found himself on the high road to fame and fortune. He was clever enough to follow up his success with a series of pictures illustrative of

scenes or incidents in his idol's work, and his reputation increased year by year. But he did not only paint Shakespearean subjects; he also devoted much time and thought to a study of the poet both as man and artist. He groped his way along tortuous paths, made dark by many commentators, stirred up the dry bones of forgotten controversies, and added his quota to the long list of attempts to disentangle hopeless knots and solve insoluble problems. Needless to say, like all true Shakespeare lovers he was also given to the fascinating though delusive quest of autobiographical hints and details in both plays and poems.

As a result of these studies he had conceived the theory that the poet, at some period of his career, had loved a woman called Rose, and that she was not the dark-eyed, false-hearted heroine of the later sonnets, but the original from whom some of his most exquisite portraits of womanhood were drawn, namely the four masquerading heroines, Rosalind, Viola, Portia and Imogen. In these characters he fancied he could trace, more or less distinctly, variations of the same feminine type, a beautiful creature in the spring-tide of life, fearless, quick-witted, and resourceful, combining the daring and impetuosity of a high-spirited youth with the passionate tenderness and self-abnegation of a true

woman. He further believed, whatever English or German critics might say to the contrary, that some of the love-letters in sonnet form were addressed to the poet's true love Rose, and not to a male friend or to an unfaithful mistress. This pretty little theory was of course based on no better evidence than that which a vivid imagination could supply, but it was at least not more absurd than the theories of those who hold that the sonnets are addressed to Pure Reason or to William himself, and assert that the dark-eyed lady is either the Catholic Church or the Bride of the Canticles.

At the time this story opens, when Jasper was about eight-and-thirty, and still only an Associate, he had long cherished the ambition of illustrating his pet theory by a picture called "Shakespeare's Rose." In this work the imaginary sweetheart was to be represented playing the spinet, with roses in her bosom and her hair, while the picture was to have for a motto the lines, from the 108th Sonnet:

"For nothing this wide universe I call,
Save thou, my Rose, in it thou art my all."

Jasper had managed to secure a professedly Elizabeth spinet, and he could call roses from the South of France even in the depths of winter, but for the face and form of the Rose herself he had hitherto sought

vainly among the models at his disposal, both professional and amateur.

At length, at an evening party at the house of his friend Mrs. Marchmont, just as he had decided to bid his hostess good-night, he caught sight of a face that made him promptly relinquish his intention. He stood still with a beating heart, while his eyes took in every detail of the picture that had arrested him. A tall figure with the short waist and long limbs of a young Diana, a small head set buoyantly upon the full white throat, dark grey eyes placed well apart, a mouth of gracious curves, and a chin that was not a meaningless end to the face, but a finely-modelled feature in itself, made up a whole that caused Jasper to exclaim half aloud, "My Rose," and sent him off, as soon as he had gazed his fill, to seek his hostess.

"Who is that tall girl in black standing by the piano?" he asked eagerly, when he had detached the lady of the house from the group of which she was the centre.

"That is Cecily Tregarthen, a great favourite of mine," replied Mrs. Marchmont, smiling at his impetuosity. "Her father and mine were brother-officers, and I have known her ever since she was a child."

"I want you to introduce me to her directly,

please," he went on. "I must have her head—no, I must have the whole of her. I have been hunting for her for months. Where does she come from? Has she any people?"

"Her father had a staff appointment at Chatham, but he died rather more than a year ago, and left his family little better than paupers. Cecily and her sisters and brother live in London now, and work for their bread."

"Do you mean to say that girl works?" demanded Jasper indignantly. "She ought to be paid a handsome salary for ornamenting this hideous city. What does she do?"

"Something in your line. She paints Christmas cards, designs fashion advertisements, and is trying to get a footing in the cheaper illustrated papers. Madge, the eldest sister, has a typewriter, that genteel substitute for a mangle, and Kate, the second, writes for a sweating newspaper. The boy, Peter, only left school a few months ago, and he has not yet succeeded in finding anything to do."

"What an emotional creature it is," broke in Jasper, who had been too much occupied in gazing at Miss Tregarthen to pay much attention to this explanation. "She blushes whenever she speaks, and

the tears rush to her eyes each time she laughs. And only look at her dear chin; it is shaped like a little fig. She must be a survival of some old-world type, for she makes all the other girls look either blowsy or anæmic."

Mrs. Marchmont laughed. She and Jasper were very good friends, and she was quite accustomed to his sudden ardours and enthusiasms. Since his rapid rise to fame he had been spoken of admiringly as "quite a character," whereas, in the days of his obscurity, his acquaintances had contented themselves with saying that Fleming was rather queer. The truth was, there was more of the natural man about Jasper than the world altogether approves, except in the case of a celebrity. He had no idea of posing as an eccentric, but he was in the habit of saying what he thought, and, so far as he could, doing what he liked. His spirits varied between the abnormally high and the abysmally low, and as he seldom dissembled his feelings, it was only to be expected that he should be something of an enigma to the more conventional among his friends.

"I'll introduce you to Cecily as soon as I can get her away from her admirers," said Mrs. Marchmont. "But I warn you to look to your heart. Cecily doesn't

mean to be naughty, but she can't help being charming, and more than one man whom I have introduced to her has no reason to thank me."

"You needn't fear for me. I am long past the combustible age."

"Ah, but there are two combustible periods in every man's life, and you may be approaching the second."

"Well, I'm willing to take all risks. She must and shall sit to me, even if I have to abduct her forcibly from her home."

"Let us hope no such violent measures will be necessary. Now I have caught her eye, and she is coming towards us."

The introduction took place, and the artist was delighted to find that Miss Tregarthen gave herself none of the airs of a beauty, but was perfectly simple and unaffected. Encouraged by her friendliness, he ventured, after a little talk upon indifferent topics, to express a hope that she would come and see his studio some day.

"I shall be delighted," she said, her face lighting up with pleasure. "I have never been to a distinguished artist's studio. The few painters I know are still hopping about, trying to get one foot on the first

rung of the ladder. May I bring one of my sisters with me?"

"Of course," he replied. "Pray bring them both, if they care to come. I have a sister too, whom I should like to introduce to you. She is a chronic invalid, poor thing, and obliged always to lie on her back."

"How dreadfully sad," said Miss Tregarthen sympathetically. "Has she been ill long?"

Before he could reply they were joined by a good-looking though rather overblown young woman of seven or eight-and-twenty, who broke in upon their conversation with the remark:

"It is time to go, Cecily. Our cab is at the door."

Thereupon Jasper was introduced to the elder Miss Tregarthen, the invitation to the studio was repeated, and it was agreed that the visit should take place on the following Sunday.

That visit was a complete success from Jasper's point of view. After tea he contrived to draw Cecily aside under the pretext of showing her some pen and ink sketches, explained (at considerable length) the subject of his next picture, and finally made his request for sittings.

“Oh, but do you think I should really do?” exclaimed Miss Tregarthen. “It seems so presumptuous to sit for the portrait of even an imaginary sweetheart of Shakespeare’s.”

“I am sure you will do beautifully,” he said, smiling. “And Shakespeare would have been a lucky fellow to have——” he stopped abruptly; feeling that, considering the shortness of their acquaintance, he was going too fast. But Miss Tregarthen did not seem at all embarrassed.

“Lucky to have me for a sweetheart?” she said composedly. “I’m afraid he would not have agreed with you. He preferred a lady with black silk hair and mourning eyes.”

“Oh, but she was his evil genius,” put in Jasper eagerly. “His feeling for his real love, for Rose, must have been of a very different kind. He probably regarded her with the mixture of chivalrous homage and passionate devotion that a man only feels for the creature who is at once his guardian angel and his earthly love.”

“How very trying for Rose,” remarked Cecily meditatively. “If a man regarded me in that sort of way I should live in perpetual terror lest he should see me with a cold in my head or a black on

my nose, which would of course quite destroy the illusion."

Jasper laughed, and told himself that Miss Tregarthen seemed a jolly sort of a girl with no primness or prudery about her. The remembrance of what Mrs. Marchmont had said about his new model's circumstances came back to his mind, and he wondered whether he could make her any return for her services.

"I feel rather unhappy about wasting so much of your time," he said. "I was going to ask you for a whole morning at least once a week."

"You needn't distress yourself about that," she replied, "for though I am a working woman I am sorry to say that my time has a very small market value at present."

"I hear that you are a sister of the brush," he went on, a happy thought striking him. "I shall be very pleased if you will allow me to give you a little instruction in return for the sittings."

"You couldn't suggest anything I should like better," she said. "But I should feel that you were paying your model much too highly."

"You wouldn't think so if you knew how long and vainly I have sought for her. Besides, I really enjoy

teaching, and I am sure you would prove an apt pupil."

"How can you possibly tell?" she laughed. "Do I bear the mark of genius on my brow?"

It was finally arranged that for the present Cecily should go twice a week to the studio, once for a sitting and once for a lesson, it being understood that the artist's invalid sister would act as chaperon on these occasions.

CHAPTER II.

THREE months later, on a bleak March afternoon, Cecily Tregarthen was making her way in the teeth of an east wind to Mr. Fleming's house in Wisteria Road, St. John's Wood. The cold blast cut through her thin, shabby jacket, numbed her fingers in their oft-mended gloves, rasped her nerves and slightly affected her temper. For it must here be confessed that Miss Tregarthen, however well she might look the part, was not a heroine at all in the usual sense of the word, but only a very human girl with, thanks to an erratic bringing up, rather more than the average girl's share of thoughtlessness and folly. No doubt, had there been any necessity for such a course, she would not have objected to masquerading in boys' clothes, or to taking advantage of a legal quibble to best a bloodthirsty Jew, but as it was, she had no opportunity of doing anything more heroic than flirting and dancing with any Orlando or Bassanio who might come in her way.

It was like stepping into a new world to quit the grey windy street and enter Mr. Fleming's studio, with its blazing fire, warm rugs, sunlit landscapes on the walls, and bowls of daffodils in every nook and corner. The owner of the studio himself was a picturesque figure, with his brown handsome face, bright eyes, and thick, dark hair, just touched with grey.

"You poor dear," exclaimed Jasper, coming forward with outstretched hands to greet his visitor. "You look as if you were frozen perfectly stiff. Come here and let me thaw you before you attempt to speak."

"You talk as if I were a joint of New Zealand mutton," said Cecily, with a little laugh, but she permitted her host to establish her in an easy-chair by the fire, draw off her gloves, and warm her hands between his own. For a few moments she lay back in her chair, and allowed the warmth and perfume to steal over her senses, and render her oblivious of the chill outer world. The man at her side and his caressing attentions were no more to her than the fire and the daffodils, though by gratifying her vanity and soothing her self-love, they put the finishing touch to her sense of satisfaction and well-being.

She was roused from the delicious lethargy into

which she had fallen by the consciousness that her companion had raised her hand to his lips, and was pressing kisses on the palm.

“We are wasting a great deal of time,” she observed, getting up from her chair. “Isn’t your sister coming in?”

“Presently,” he said; “but you needn’t be such a prickly rose. I was only studying ‘the tender inward of your hand.’”

“It is not the turn for a sitting to-day. You are to criticise my new drawings.”

“Ah, you were much nicer to me the last time you came. You quite forgot to ask where Dulcie was.”

“That was because it was your birthday,” she answered, blushing slightly. “I couldn’t be cross to you on such an auspicious occasion.”

“No, you were very sweet, dearest, and you gave me the nicest birthday present I ever had in my life.”

“You mean you took it,” said Cecily, trying to look severe. “And you know I don’t like you to call me dearest.”

“But it doesn’t mean anything from me,” he returned carelessly. “It is only one of my engag-

ing little ways. Now let me see your latest *chef d'œuvre*."

He opened the girl's portfolio, and glanced over its contents.

"What on earth is this?" he inquired, holding up a pen and ink sketch.

"Ah, that is my last success," said Cecily, with pride. "It is a design for the advertisement of the Empress Velvet. Don't you see that it represents a girl, and a very pretty girl too, wearing a gown of Empress velvet, and sitting on a sofa with an obviously devoted young man. At a little distance is another girl, not so pretty or so well dressed, who is sitting all alone, and saying to herself, 'I wish I had a frock of the Empress velvet.' The manager was so pleased with the design that he said he would give me a guinea for it, if I would work it up a little more."

"Bah, the idea of your wasting your talent and imagination on such trash," said Fleming impatiently. "Several of these things are really charming in the rather niggling style that seems inherent in every feminine artist. You ought to work more with charcoal, and try to acquire a broader method. With proper training and more practice you should make your mark in black and white."

“I do like you when you talk like that,” said the girl, flushing with pleasure. “Now give me something to do to improve my niggling style.”

Jasper brought out a cast of a piece of frieze, and having provided his pupil with charcoal and paper, amused himself by making a rough sketch of her bent head and serious expression as she sat at work. Cecily was still occupied with her drawing when the door opened, and Miss Fleming was wheeled in on her reclining-chair. She was a plain woman, a year or two older than her brother, with coarse features and swarthy complexion, while her appearance was not improved by the peevish, discontented lines about her mouth. Her face brightened as she greeted her visitor, for between the two women, so dissimilar in age, appearance, and circumstances, an odd kind of friendship had sprung up. Miss Fleming had been attracted from the first by the young girl who possessed all that she herself lacked, but who was neither spoilt nor arrogant, while Cecily on her part was sorry for the irritable, unattractive invalid, and always took her captious humours in good part.

“Tea will be ready directly,” said Miss Fleming. “Jasper, as you have had Cecily to yourself all this time, and as you never take tea, you might as well go

for a walk now, and leave us to have our gossip undisturbed by fear of your masculine criticism."

Her brother looked a little taken aback at this suggestion, but as he was accustomed to allow the invalid her own way in all minor matters, and as she was capable of making things unpleasant for him if he stayed, he thought it better to accede to her request.

"Very well," he said reluctantly. "But first I have to break a sad piece of news to my pupil. Get your handkerchief ready, Miss Tregarthen. The melancholy fact is that I am going to Paris to-morrow for a fortnight, or possibly three weeks."

"That is indeed a blow," answered Cecily with mock seriousness. "I need scarcely say that I shall count the days till you come back. Meanwhile I will be very industrious, and do a number of charcoal studies to surprise you with on your return."

When Jasper had left the room Miss Fleming turned and asked abruptly:

"Cecily, do you mean to marry my brother?"

"I! No," replied the girl, laughing. "My intentions are no more serious than his own."

"That is prevarication. You know perfectly well that you could marry him if you chose. But if you don't mean to take him you ought not to lead him on,

and encourage him in the way you are doing. He has had quite troubles enough in his life without another unfortunate love affair being added to the list."

"But I don't believe he has ever thought of falling in love with me," pleaded Cecily. "He looks upon me as part pupil, part playfellow, for he scolds or teases me nearly all the time. Besides, he has told me all about his first engagement, and shown me the girl's photograph."

"Oh, yes, Jasper finds his broken heart very useful when he wants to get on confidential terms with a woman," observed Miss Fleming. "But the mere fact that he scolds and teases you shows that he is in danger. If he meant nothing he would be much more sentimental."

"That sounds like a saying of Oscar Wilde's," said Cecily, who was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "Well, what do you wish me to do?"

"Leave Jasper alone, if you think there is no chance of your ever caring for him."

"I like him very much," said Cecily frankly. "He has been very kind to me, and he amuses, interests, and puzzles me. I really almost wonder that I haven't lost my heart to him. But I fancy that in some ways we are too much alike; we are both rather easy-going

and self-indulgent. I think we ought to marry to better ourselves from a moral point of view—to choose someone who will give us more ballast and keep us in order.”

“ Well, don’t play with Jasper if you don’t consider him good enough for you,” said Miss Fleming brusquely. “ I shall miss your visits very much, but naturally my brother must come first, and I consider myself especially responsible for his peace of mind because I broke off his first engagement. Did he tell you about that among his other confidences ? ”

“ No; he has never said a word about you that was not kind and brotherly.”

“ Well, I’ll tell you the story, because it will show you why I feel bound to try and save him from further unhappiness. Besides, I’m not ashamed of it; I did it for his sake as well as my own, and it has all turned out for the best. I have already told you something about my girlhood, how I was always ugly, uglier than I am now, and how my mother never could be brought to realise it.”

“ Yes,” said the girl in some embarrassment. “ But if people are nice and kind one doesn’t think about their looks.”

“Doesn't one?” returned Miss Fleming drily. “You may not, but the world in general does. When I was a child I used to be told that if I was good everyone would love me, but when I grew up I found that to be one of the many pleasant fallacies we are taught in childhood. Unfortunately, my mother, who had been a beauty herself, had made up her mind that I was to be lovely and charming. That was why she called me *Dulcibella*, and she never could understand why people sometimes smiled when they heard my name. As soon as I was eighteen I was dressed up like other girls, and taken to dances and parties of all kinds. Ah, you can have no idea what sufferings society can inflict upon a plain and unattractive girl. I had just as much craving for pleasure, admiration, yes, and love too, as the prettiest girl in London, but at all the parties I went to I had to sit neglected and forgotten among the elderly women, or to console myself with another social failure like myself. At dances I used to think myself lucky if three charitable men could be found by my hostess to bestow three duty dances upon me. Even other girls avoided me, for, let people say what they will, it is the pretty women who have the most women friends. An ugly woman is treated by her feminine acquaintances much in the

same manner as a wounded deer is treated by the rest of the herd."

"Oh, don't say that," exclaimed Cecily, her eyes filling with tears. "I can't bear to think of anyone being made so unhappy."

"Well, suffering of that kind doesn't generally get much sympathy, because it has not any of the dignity of a great grief. It is only the result of the social law which decrees that women of the upper classes must all lead, or appear to lead, exactly the same manner of life. We are all expected to dance and enjoy ourselves in our youth, to marry and have children in due course, and to occupy ourselves thenceforward in housewifely and maternal duties. That man-made law does not take into account the fact that there are hundreds and thousands of women who never have the opportunity of dancing and enjoying themselves, still less of marrying and having children. It even denies to the vast majority of these poor social failures the only antidote to human sorrow and disappointment—work."

"But you have great artistic talent, judging from your sketches," put in Cecily. "I wonder you did not devote yourself to art."

"That is just what I longed to do, and when we

were boy and girl my drawings were said to show more promise than Jasper's. But my mother could not afford to give us both lessons, and all the money she could spare was spent on Jasper's training. Then so much of my time was taken up in paying calls, trimming hats, and arranging flowers that I could only have worked at my drawing in a desultory amateurish way and I love it too well to turn it into a mere pastime. If I could have cultivated my talent I believe that I should now be a healthy, contented woman. However, you will ask what all this has to do with Jasper's love affair. I am coming to that, but I wanted you to understand what sort of a life I had led before I meddled with his. When I was about eight-and-twenty my back began to trouble me. Polite doctors said it was spinal neuralgia, and rude doctors said it was hysteria, but whatever it may have been, not one of them was able to do me any good. Before I became quite an invalid my mother died, and it was settled that I should go and keep house for Jasper. We had not been in our new home three months, however, before he became engaged to a pretty, heartless, empty-headed girl. She disliked me because I was ugly, and I knew that Jasper would be completely lost to me if he married her. There was nothing before me but life

in a cheap boarding-house or a lonely lodging. I felt sure the girl would make him miserable, and for both our sakes I determined to break off the match. As you know, I accomplished my purpose; it is not necessary to tell you how I did it."

"Did your brother find out that it was your doing?" asked Cecily.

"Yes, unluckily he did. He was very unhappy and very angry with me for a long time. He went abroad for a year, so that I had to go into a boarding-house after all. By the time he came back the girl had married someone else, and I had become a helpless invalid. He came to see me, forgave me, and took me to live with him again. So now you see why I am so anxious to save him an unnecessary heartache. I should not mind your marrying him, because I think you would make him happy, and I am sure you would not treat me as if I were a female pariah. But don't flirt with him, Cecily."

"I think he can play at that game as well as I," answered the girl. "However, if you really believe that he is more in earnest than he appears, the sittings had better come to an end. He has made scores of studies of me, and the picture is practically finished."

"Yes, and you see he is going away for two or

three weeks. When he returns, come once more to give him a final sitting, and bid him good-bye. You can say that you cannot spare the time to continue your visits. I dare say it is better for you that you should have no more to do with us; we are an unlucky family, and generally bring ill luck on any one who is connected with us."

"Well, you have brought me nothing but good luck," said Cecily. "I have learnt a great deal from your brother, and you have been very kind to me."

"Ah, but you can never depend upon us," said the invalid in the tone of one who takes a morbid pride in a family failing. "There is dark blood in us, you know; our great grandmother was a beautiful half-caste. I suppose I inherit the features of one of her most unprepossessing relations, but Jasper does not show the taint at all except in his finger-nails. Still, there is an uncivilised strain in both of us, and we are not always to be trusted. So I warn you to be careful in your dealings with us."

"I am not afraid," said Cecily, laughing. "I must say good-bye now, but I shall come and see you while your brother is away, because I know you will be lonely without him."

CHAPTER III.

ON leaving the studio Cecily travelled by omnibus as far as Marylebone Mansions, where she and her sisters and brother occupied a flat on the fourth floor. As every one knows, Marylebone Mansions are not luxurious habitations. They cannot boast of a lift, electric light, or even a boy in buttons. They contain small suites of unfurnished apartments, which are let at very moderate rents, and occupied, for the most part, by decayed gentlepeople.

Cecily toiled slowly up the four steep flights, and at last, breathless and exhausted, found herself in the little sitting-room where her family had just sat down to high tea. A large dish of mince formed the *pièce de résistance* of the meal, while half a cold rice pudding and a seed-cake took the place of second course and dessert.

“Mince again,” observed Cecily, surveying the feast with discontented eyes. “I should like to know what

lost soul it was who first invented the combination of tea and mince. I believe the tea turns the mince to leather inside us."

"I'm afraid Mr. Fleming is spoiling you," said Margaret good-humouredly. "You get such a nice tea at the studio that you come home with no appetite for our humble fare."

"It is very good mince," observed Peter, a blunt-featured youth of about eighteen. "I ought to know, because I helped to mince it."

"Then I hope you washed your hands first," said Cecily. "As a rule all the blacks in London seem to be attracted to your finger-tips."

Laying aside her hat and jacket she sat down to the table, and thanks to a healthy appetite, made a very fair meal off the despised dish. Before the rice pudding stage had been reached, the little party was startled by a sharp ring at the bell. Peter jumped up to open the door, and a moment later ushered a gentleman into the room with the announcement:

"Here's Mr. Dormer."

Cecily made an involuntary gesture of dismay at the sight of the visitor, who was a tall, distinguished-looking man of about five-and-thirty, with broad, slightly stooping shoulders, and a well-shaped head.

His face was rather pale, with long, sharply-cut features, and eyes so deep-set that their colour was scarcely distinguishable.

“I hope you will forgive me for disturbing you at dinner,” he said, addressing Margaret in tone of rather formal courtesy. “But at the eleventh hour I have had to make some alteration in my play, to write a fresh scene in short, and you know what my hand-writing is; it takes a person of some imagination to decipher it. So I have come to ask you if you will be so very kind as to copy it at short notice. The last rehearsal takes place to-morrow afternoon. I will send my man round for the copy in the morning if you will allow me.”

“Oh, but I will do it at once,” said Madge briskly, “and post it to you to-night.”

“That would be very good of you,” he returned with an air of relief. “But are you sure that I am not putting you to any inconvenience?”

“Not a scrap,” she replied, flashing her eyes and teeth at him from sheer force of habit. “I wish you were. Business is unpleasantly slack just now.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” he said, looking over her head to avoid meeting her eyes. “But as you are not very busy I hope you may be able to be present at the

first performance of 'Noughts and Crosses,' on Thursday night. I have a couple of stalls at my disposal, and I shall be very pleased if you and one of your sisters will make use of them."

As he spoke he glanced at the two younger girls. His eyes did not rest long on Kate's square, curly head, or upon the handsome, decided little features that surmounted the stiff shirt-front and spotted tie, but they lingered upon Cecily's pensive face. Her head was slightly bent, her eyes downcast, and her cheek had grown perceptibly paler.

"A maiden of our century, yet most meek," quoted Dormer to himself approvingly. "What a pity that she should be placed amid such dreadful surroundings."

"Of course we shall be only too delighted to come," said Madge, as Dormer produced the tickets. "I had been looking forward to seeing the play some day, but I did not expect to be there on the first night. I am sure it will be a tremendous success."

"Thank you," he said. "I am not so sanguine. What one has done always seems so poor compared with what one meant and hoped to do. Good-night. I hope you will excuse me for having intruded upon you at so late an hour."

He was about to leave the room, when his eye was caught by some pen and ink sketches that were pinned upon the wall. They purported to be studies of life in fairyland, and represented Puck, Peaseblossom, and the rest of the Shakespearean elves playing, courting and quarrelling among tall grass and flowers.

“What pretty sketches!” said Dormer. “May I ask whose work they are?”

“They are mine,” said Cecily, coming forward, her cheeks as red as a rose. She was given to blushing vividly on the slightest provocation, but this habit is not, invariably as Dormer supposed, a sign of exceptional modesty.

“They are quite charming,” he said kindly, anxious to reassure her. “You ought to try your hand at illustrating stories. My publishers are bringing out some fairy tales in the autumn, which are to be copiously illustrated. I should be very pleased to show them some of your drawings, if you think you would like that kind of work.”

“Oh, thank you,” exclaimed Cecily, raising a pair of shining eyes to his. “There is nothing I should like better, if you really think my drawings are good enough.”

“They look to me decidedly more artistic than most

of the illustrations in children's books. If you will put together a few of the best I will come on Friday to fetch them. I shall want to hear your opinion of Thursday's performance."

As soon as the visitor was gone, Cecily turned to her sisters with an expression of mingled ecstasy and distress.

"Isn't he a perfect angel of kindness?" she exclaimed. "But wasn't it unlucky his coming just at this time? We shall be associated for ever after in his mind with minced mutton and three-cornered bits of toast."

"I don't suppose he noticed anything," said Madge placidly. "And what does it matter if he did, as long as he is connected in our minds with cheques and postal orders? He is a small but regular income to us, thanks to that threatening he had of writer's cramp."

"I believe he really is a good sort in spite of his stand-off manners," said Kate, as she took up a position with her back to the fire, and lighted a cigarette. "I was talking to some fellows about him only the other day, and they said that though he was rather a Philistine and didn't know how to enjoy himself, yet that he was popular in his profession. He's always ready to put his hand in his pocket when a subscription is being

got up for any poor devil who has gone under, and he has been known to give a leg-up to more than one promising beginner.”

Cecily listened to this account with an interest that might have appeared rather extreme in one who, after all, was a mere acquaintance, but the truth was that like most women of impulsive emotional temperament she had a pronounced tendency to hero-worship. No sooner did she hear of a man who stood out from among his fellows by reason of his physical courage, mental strength, or moral excellence, than she instantly exalted him upon an imaginary pedestal, and waved before him the incense of her generous admiration. In former days her father had been her hero-in-chief, but he had shared his honours with various V.C.'s and wounded veterans. Of late she had had no satisfactory subject whereon to lavish her youthful enthusiasm, for though she had endeavoured to raise Jasper Fleming to the rank of a hero, he obstinately persisted in jumping down from the pedestal upon which she placed him. But Mr. Dormer was a far more hopeful specimen. His books and plays testified to his intellectual powers, report spoke highly of his character and manner of life, and she and her sisters had already received several proofs of his kindness and helpfulness.

The only drawback to her satisfaction with her new hero was a mournful and humiliating conviction that she was utterly insignificant in his eyes; worse still, that if he knew how foolish and frivolous she really was he would regard her with only too well-justified disapproval and contempt. This feeling found a voice in her comment upon Kate's words.

"How different he is from most of the men we have met," she remarked in regretful tones. "Perhaps we should have been better if we had know more of his sort. We used to behave very badly in the old days."

"We did rather," agreed Madge cheerfully. "But we had plenty of fun."

"Ye—es," returned Cecily, the pensive look in her eyes gradually giving place to a wicked sparkle. "We *did* have fun. Do you remember that last ball at Canterbury, Madge?"

"I should just think I did. You danced twelve times with the Sandeman boy, and when I told father he ought to scold you, he said he felt more inclined to condole with you, that the crime must have brought its own punishment."

"Poor father, he never could bear the Sandeman boy because he wore spectacles," said Cecily. "But you needn't talk about me, Madge. You went into

supper three times with that fat Major Dashwood, and the third time he proposed to you. He cried when you refused him, and we all said they must have been tears of thankfulness at his escape."

These pleasing reminiscences of past misdoings were cut short by the discovery that Peter had cleared away the tea-things, and that it was time to begin the evening's work. It should here be explained that Peter, being a youth of spirit, had determined that until he could find some means of adding to the family exchequer, he would relieve his sisters of those domestic duties which often proved a serious hindrance to their more profitable occupations. Accordingly, he laid the table, did the marketing, dusted the sitting-room, and upon occasion assisted the inexperienced little servant with the cooking. His afternoons were usually spent in visits to agents' offices, or in applying for situations that he had seen advertised, while his evenings were devoted to a conscientious endeavour to supply the deficiencies of his public school education.

On the present occasion Margaret prepared to copy Mr. Dormer's manuscript, Kate, having finished her cigarette, sat down to a big desk, covered with an untidy mass of papers, and Peter reluctantly produced a French grammar which, with many sighs and much

rumpling of hair, he proceeded to study. Cecily seated herself by her brother's side, and began to make the desired alterations in her advertisement design.

"Any luck to-day, old boy?" she asked presently, noticing that Peter's studies seemed to have come to a stand-still.

"The same as usual," answered the lad with an air of would-be indifference. "I went after that secretaryship where no previous experience was necessary, you know, and they were perfectly willing to engage me if I would take shares in the business to the amount of five hundred pounds. That being no go, I went on to the warehouse where they wanted a corresponding clerk, and found a *queue* of about thirty fellows waiting to interview the manager. When I had my turn the old fellow asked me if I could do book-keeping by double entry, write shorthand, and correspond in French and German. When I said I couldn't, he wanted to know what I meant by wasting a busy man's time in that fashion. Of course a German got the berth. He could correspond in three languages, and do book-keeping upside down, if necessary. The other fellows said that he had undersold us, offered to take eighteen-and-six instead of a pound a week."

"Oh, well, better luck next time," said Cecily

cheerfully. "Something is sure to turn up before long."

"It's very odd," said the boy meditatively, "it's very odd that a fellow's education should be no good to him when he wants to earn a living. Here have I been wasting years over Latin and Greek which are now no earthly use to me, while the mathematics they make such a fuss about are precious little help in commercial accounts. Of course we always despised the foreign masters too thoroughly to learn much of them, and no one cared what sort of a fist we wrote."

"Yet your education cost double as much as all of ours put together," remarked Kate, looking up from her writing.

"And here are you girls all making money in one way or another," went on Peter in aggrieved tones, "while I can't turn an honest penny, do what I will."

"You save us plenty of pennies, which comes to the same thing," put in Cecily consolingly. "I'd back you to keep house against any boy in England. When you marry your wife will find you a perfect treasure, especially if she is an advanced young lady. You mustn't get downhearted, old man; you've plenty of time before you."

"Oh, I'm all right," said the lad with a grin. "Only blow these irregular verbs!"

CHAPTER IV.

“THERE’S been a woman murdered near Bethnal Green,” observed Kate next morning at breakfast, as she looked up from her paper. “I should recommend you to go off there at once, Cecily, and make sketches of the locality. You might take them to the editor of the *Weekly Reporter*; if no one had been beforehand with you, I think he would probably accept them.”

“It is a dreadful morning,” said Cecily, looking out of the window at the dark sky from which the rain was falling with quiet persistence. She was too much afraid of Kate’s sarcastic contempt to urge that she did not like the nature of the task that had been proposed to her.

“Working women can’t stop to think about weather,” returned Kate. “It would be a pity to throw away the chance of earning a little money with very slight trouble.”

This argument was not to be refuted in the present

state of the family exchequer. Cecily sighed, and agreed to undertake the expedition.

Half-an-hour later she was seated in an omnibus her cold feet resting on the muddy straw, and her spirits considerably below zero. Arrived at her destination, a grimy alley leading out of a back street, Cecily stood under a doorway, and sketched the scene of the tragedy. A number of roughs, male and female, were hanging about the entrance to the alley, staring curiously at the closed door and blank windows of the police-guarded house, and repeating to each other in unctuous tones all the ghastly details of the crime.

Candid critics among the crowd peered over Cecily's shoulder, and compared her half-finished sketch unfavourably with the original, and a ghoulish-looking woman whispered in her ear that for a consideration she might be able to get her a sight of the body. Sick at heart and trembling in every limb, the girl hastily finished her task, and escaped from her horrible surroundings. She took the train to the Temple, and then walked to the office of the *Weekly Reporter* in Bedford Street, where she hoped to dispose of her work. But, alas! another artist had forestalled her, and his sketches, though ill-drawn and inaccurate, had found favour in the editor's sight by reason of their so-called "realism."

They included a fancy portrait of the murderer and of his victim, as well as a sketch of the public-house where the former had maddened himself with drink before he committed the crime.

Against attractions such as these Cecily felt that it was hopeless to compete, so she rolled up her drawings and went out into the street. The rain had increased to a downpour, the omnibuses were all full, and as she realised that she had had all her trouble and distress for nothing she felt that she would like to sit down upon a doorstep and indulge in a good cry. That being clearly impossible, she stood for a moment at the corner of the street, debating whether she should get some lunch at a shop or go straight home. She had just decided on the former course when a young man who was hurrying past suddenly stopped short and exclaimed :

“Miss Tregarthen, by all that’s wonderful! What can have brought you down to the Strand on such a morning?”

“I have been taking some drawings to an editor,” replied Cecily, with a blush that was inspired partly by shame at her errand, partly by the recollection of the somewhat violent flirtation she had carried on with Mr. Bassett at their previous meetings. The young man

had been introduced to her at Mrs. Marchmont's house, and she had afterwards met him at two or three musical parties, at which he, a rising drawing-room tenor, had been engaged to sing. "But the editor wouldn't have them," she went on mournfully, as the blush died away, leaving her cheeks paler than before.

"Then he ought to be shot," remarked the young man cheerfully. "But I say, Miss Tregarthen, you look awfully fagged; I expect you want your luncheon. I wish you'd come with me to Batti's. I was on my way there when I met you."

"Oh, thanks very much," said Cecily feebly, for in her hungry, exhausted condition the proposal sounded almost irresistibly tempting. "But I think I ought to get home to lunch."

"Nonsense, you would faint by the way. You don't think there would be any harm in lunching with me, do you? I assure you Batti's is a most respectable place; lots of ladies go there, both alone and with their men friends."

Cecily mentally acknowledged that what Mr. Bassett said was perfectly true. Though it might not be a very conventional proceeding to go to a Strand restaurant with a male acquaintance, yet there was no actual harm in it, and many girls would accept such an invita-

tion as a matter of course, her sister Kate among others. Still she hesitated and endeavoured to effect a compromise.

“I really am very hungry,” she said. “Will you take me to a confectioner’s for a cup of coffee and a bun?”

“Certainly not,” he replied. “I consider confectioners’ shops most dangerous and demoralising places; the young women behind the counter are always so alarmingly affable. Come along to Batti’s, and I will promise you something better than a cup of coffee and a bun.”

Cecily made no further protest, but meekly accompanied her friend to the restaurant. She was obliged to admit that it was very pleasant to rest her weary limbs on a comfortable seat in a well-warmed room, and to allay the pangs of hunger with a charming little luncheon, which included a bottle of champagne. It was seldom in those days that she tasted wine, and one glass of champagne went like fire through her veins, brightening her eyes, flushing her cheeks and causing her to feel on the best of terms with herself and the whole of mankind. She laughed at her companion’s jokes with rather more appreciation than was justified by their intrinsic merits, and could not bring herself to

snub him when his hitherto respectful manner gradually gave way to an easy familiarity which occasionally bordered on impertinence.

When at length Cecily declared for the fourth time that she really must go, she positively must not stop a minute longer, Mr. Bassett glanced out of the window, and observed:

“It’s raining hard still. I don’t see the use of going home. I mean to try and get into the Gaiety; there’s a *matinée* to-day of ‘Puss in Boots up to Date.’ You had better come too. They’ll give me a couple of stalls if the house is not full.”

“Oh, no, that’s quite impossible,” said Cecily in virtuous tones, though at the bottom of her pleasure-loving soul she was yearning to accept the invitation. “Margaret wouldn’t like it.”

“Who the deuce is Margaret?” asked the young man lightly.

“My eldest sister,” replied Cecily, vainly trying to look as if she were shocked at his disrespectful language.

“If she’s the sister I saw with you at the Brereton’s, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind,” he remarked. “She looked much too good a fellow to spoil sport. I expect she’d like to stand in your shoes.”

“So she would,” said Cecily, rather amused at his penetration.

“Then come on,” he continued brusquely. “Don’t be obstinate. What’s the good of spending a dull afternoon at home when you might be listening to Arthur Roberts at the Gaiety?”

This reasoning seemed quite unanswerable. Cecily assured herself that Leonard Bassett was nothing but a boy, that to go to a theatre with him was very much the same as going with Peter or one of Peter’s friends. Besides, it was perfectly true that Madge would not really be shocked at such a proceeding, and that Kate would wonder why she hesitated.

“Oh, well, I think I may as well go if you are sure you can get tickets,” she said, jumping up and arranging her hat before one of the mirrors. A good many glances were turned upon her as she stood there, patting the little locks that curled all the more crisply for their wetting, and pulling down the spotted veil that seemed to emphasise rather than to conceal the brilliance of her eyes and cheeks.

A quarter of an hour later Miss Tregarthen and her companion were seated in the second row of stalls at the Gaiety, listening to the lively music, and laughing at the astounding jokes of “Puss in Boots up to

Date." In spite of, or perhaps because of, its flavour of forbidden fruit, Cecily was thoroughly enjoying her afternoon's entertainment. She looked compassionately at a trio of girls in the next row, who were plain and dowdy, had no male escort, and did not look as if they had indulged in champagne for luncheon. Poor things! She wondered whether they found much pleasure in life, and fancied that they must feel rather envious of her superior lot.

The burlesque went gaily on its way, the crowded theatre grew very hot, and Mr. Bassett, inspired perhaps by the music in addition to the lion's share of the champagne, became alarmingly *empressé* in his manner. Even Cecily, enthusiastic theatre-goer though she was, felt rather relieved when at length the performance came to an end.

"You'll come and have some tea before you go home," said Bassett as they left the building.

"No, thank you," replied Cecily with unmistakable decision this time. "I must take an omnibus home at once."

"I'm going your way," said the young man. "You must let me drop you at your own door."

He hailed a hansom, and Cecily stepped into it with a sigh of resignation. She felt as though she

had spent centuries in his company, but it seemed impossible to escape from him. As they drove up Regent Street she caught sight of a pale intellectual-looking face among the crowd on the pavement, and hastily leant back in the cab to avoid being seen.

“Did you see that tall round-shouldered fellow on the right?” asked Bassett. “That’s Dormer, the author and dramatist. He’s quite a celebrity nowadays. I can’t say I care much about his books, they are too jolly clever for me; but I know he’s a kind-hearted chap. He helped a chum of mine out of a tight place the other day.”

As Cecily listened to his careless words, she felt a sudden sense of revulsion against herself, her companion, and her afternoon’s amusement. She discovered that Mr. Bassett was nothing but a pert empty-headed youth, and that the admiration, the luncheon, and the burlesque that she had so enjoyed, were most ignoble sources of pleasure. And how Mr. Dormer would despise her, if he knew in what manner she had spent the afternoon. She felt sure that he was wholly indifferent to luncheon, that he would be horribly bored by a burlesque, and that he would thoroughly disapprove of any young woman who went about unchaperoned in the company of a young man.

“I wish I were good,” she thought to herself regretfully. “If only mother had lived, or we had grown up in a more particular, steady-going set, I might have been a nicer sort of girl.”

At this point her reflections were interrupted by Mr. Bassett, who fancied that her silence was caused by regret that the moment of their separation was so near at hand.

“Well,” he said, trying to assume a tone of sentimental tenderness, “we shall soon have to say good-bye, worse luck. We’ve had a ripping good time though, haven’t we? Can’t we arrange to have another afternoon together? We might do one of the music halls next time.”

As he spoke he laid his hand with a gentle pressure upon hers. If he had been in a four-wheeler he thought that he would have put his arm round her waist. Rather to his surprise, Cecily withdrew her hand with a petulant gesture, and shrank as far from him as space would allow.

“You’re uncommon cruel all of a sudden,” he remarked in injured tones. “We’ve been such good friends all the afternoon.”

Cecily shrugged her shoulders, but was saved the necessity for explaining her change of conduct by the

fact that at the same moment the cab drew up at her own door.

“Good-bye,” she cried, her spirits rising at the prospect of release. “Thanks so much for everything. I dare say we shall meet again some day.”

With a sigh of relief she sprang to the pavement, and ran into the house without so much as a backward glance at her playfellow of the afternoon.

CHAPTER V.

ON the following evening the first performance of Mr. Dormer's new play "Noughts and Crosses" was to take place. Kate had insisted that Cecily should make use of the second ticket since she herself would probably be able to get an order later on from the personage whom she was accustomed to speak of as "my editor." Peter was to accompany his sisters and fight his way into the pit. The Miss Tregarthens set out upon their omnibus journey to the theatre in high spirits, for they were conscious of looking well, in spite of the shabbiness of their old black dresses, and they had every anticipation of an interesting and exciting evening. The stalls were empty when the sisters arrived, but they quickly filled up with a representative "first-night" audience, and there seemed every prospect that the house would be crowded from floor to ceiling. A good many glasses were levelled at the two striking-looking young women in black, and Miles,

from his seat at the back of a stage-box, caught a glimpse of a little head "sunning over with curls" which he guessed to be Cecily's, and for some unaccountable reason he felt an additional tremor of nervousness at the sight.

It soon appeared, however, that there was no occasion for anxiety on the part of the dramatist or his friends, for the cleverness of "Noughts and Crosses" was not to be denied by even the most captious of critics. The plot was ingenious, the characters—with one exception—were convincing, the dialogue was often brilliant and always pointed, while the situations were contrived with an ingenuity that proved the author to have an unusual talent for dramatic effect. There seemed to be only one defect of any importance in the whole play, and this was to be found in the character of the heroine, who was evidently intended to be the embodiment of all the feminine graces, but who failed to arouse either interest or sympathy by reason of her feebleness and unreality. The lack of warmth and passion that was occasionally noticeable in the love scenes was due to the insipidity of this prominent character rather than to any weakness in the dialogue or action.

A lady who was seated just in front of the Tre-

garthens made comments upon the play to her companion in the tone and manner of one having authority.

"It's good—it's absolutely good," she remarked as the curtain went down at the conclusion of the first act. "Every word tells, and the men are all there. But when is the heroine going to wake up? Poor Delaunay is doing her best with the part, but she never gets a chance. Has Mr. Dormer never met a real live woman that he should draw such a stick in petticoats? Has he never made a fool of himself about anybody that he should write such pasteboard love scenes?"

"He must have had his romances," said her companion. "He's a good bit over thirty."

"Oh yes, he must have had romances, or he couldn't write them," went on the critical lady. "But I don't believe that he has ever had a grand passion, ever loved a woman so that he wanted to stand on his head and make himself ridiculous for her sake. That's the greatest proof of affection a man can give, you know."

Cecily listened to these comments with an odd mingling of annoyance and satisfaction, annoyance at the adverse criticisms, satisfaction at the suggestion that her hero had never experienced the fret and fever of a grand passion. She liked to think of him as

“unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,” to fancy that he alone of all the men she knew was proof against pretty faces and feminine wiles.

When the curtain came down for the second time, the lady in front again gave vent to her irritation against the character of the heroine.

“It’s all so perfect except for that woman,” she complained. “The dialogue is really witty, which is curious considering that Mr. Dormer is rather a dull man in private life; I suppose he keeps his good things for his books and plays. But I should like to run a bonnet-pin into the heroine, only I know she wouldn’t bleed; she can have nothing but sawdust in her veins. Did you notice a proof of the author’s ignorance of feminine nature in the last scene? He really might know by this time that when a woman adores a man, and knows herself to be adored by him, she doesn’t go about mewling all the time. . As long as she is alone with her lover she is as jolly as possible, however many stern parents or jealous husbands there may be in the background. And then what a mistake to make a proposal take place in the morning. No man ever proposed to me before lunch. If he had I should have told him to go and have a beefsteak and a bottle of Bass, and then come and ask me again.”

“Evidently you combine observation with experience,” said her companion, laughing. “You ought to write a book on dramatic art, Mrs. Thornton, and give these poor duffers the benefit of your superior knowledge.”

At the conclusion of the play there were the usual shouts of “Author! Author!” and the applause which had been vociferous throughout was renewed again and again. The enthusiasm reached its height when Dormer came before the foot-lights to bow his acknowledgments. He was neither nervous nor excited now. He had been through very much the same scene twice before, and, so soon does success lose its savour, he found himself wondering why on earth any one should be gratified by all this stamping and clapping. It had been pleasant enough the first time, no doubt, but now it seemed to him little more than meaningless noise. He was glad that the piece had gone off well; after all the worry and labour of preparation he should have been vexed if it had made a fiasco. Yet neither success nor failure would have affected any one but himself and the *personnel* of the theatre. In the latter event he knew that his friends and acquaintances would have condoled with him civilly enough, but that in their secret hearts they would have felt rather amused

at his misfortune, and told each other behind his back that they had always thought him an over-rated fellow.

At this point in his reflections his eyes, wandering carelessly over the rows of upturned faces, suddenly encountered another pair of eyes, that looked into his with a happy, triumphant gaze, eyes that were proud for him, glad for him, exultant for him, and all without one thought of self, as the eyes of a wife or sweetheart might have been. As Miles stood before the footlights and looked round upon the applauding crowd, he felt as if he and Cecily Tregarthen, the owner of the eyes, were alone in the building, for a sudden conviction forced itself upon him that she was the only creature among those indifferent multitudes who honestly rejoiced at his success, the only creature who would have sincerely grieved at his failure. And in the same moment he realised that success was still sweet, and that failure would have been intolerable.

When the tumult had subsided somewhat, the Tregarthens made their way to the entrance, there to wait until Peter had emerged from the pit. Miles, who had been putting some friends into their carriage, came up to the girls, and asked if he might get them a cab.

"No, thanks," said Madge. "We don't run to cabs. We are going home by omnibus, with Peter to take care of us."

Though he knew that he ought to be distributing himself among a dozen influential personages, Miles lingered with the girls, for well as they were able to take care of themselves, he could not bring himself to leave them standing under the electric light, exposed to the gaze of all the loafers who had collected round the entrance. He listened absently to Margaret's compliments and congratulations, but from time to time his eyes stole to Cecily's face, in the half-conscious hope of meeting once again that wonderful revelation of sympathy and understanding. But the rose-flush of excitement had died out of her cheeks, and her eyes remained obstinately fixed upon the ground. She contributed little to Madge's admiring comments on the play; perhaps she was aware that she had already revealed her thoughts.

Presently Peter made his appearance, looking warm and dishevelled, as though he had taken more than his share of pushing and being pushed. Before he hurried his sisters away Miles found time to say to Cecily:

"Have you looked out your drawings? I am coming for them to-morrow, you know."

“They are quite ready,” she replied, with a glance of shy gratitude. “It is so good of you to think of them at such a time.”

Then she disappeared into the night, and Miles hurried away to receive the guests whom he had invited to sup with him at the Circus Restaurant. The party, consisting chiefly of the heroes and heroines of the evening, was extremely lively, and the festivity prolonged itself into the small hours of the morning. Miles was heartily tired of the entertainment long before it was over, and as he drove home to his chambers, he realised more keenly than ever before that the joy of creation, the unalloyed satisfaction in the completion of a piece of honest work, the sense of having fought a good fight with the difficulties of conception and execution and come off victorious—that these are the author’s true rewards, and outvalue all the success and notoriety the world has to give. But now for the first time he began to ask himself whether this feeling was not partly due to his peculiar circumstances, whether fame might not seem sweeter and fortune more desirable if he had some one to share them with, some one to whom his triumph would be as her own.

With a certain shy surmise which was quaint enough in one to whom the critics alluded as “that

popular dramatist," he wondered how he should feel if he were driving home that night with a young wife at his side. He would have his arm round her waist perhaps, and it was possible that her head might be resting on his shoulder. His heart gave a little jump at the thought, and involuntarily his arm stole out from his side, while he glanced down as though half expecting to see a fair bowed head upon his coat sleeve. He laughed at his own folly the next moment, as his arm clasped the empty air, and he hastened to remind himself of his long-cherished articles of faith, that marriage was a lottery in which there were few prizes, that a wife was usually a clog on a man's career, and that children were the source of more anxiety than comfort. He had acquired certain old-bachelor instincts and prejudices which caused him to shrink from the idea of a woman's constant presence in his house, from the intrusion of feminine affairs and domestic details into the comfortable privacy of celibate life. He was dimly conscious, moreover, that his disposition was jealous and exacting, and if he once placed his peace of mind and happiness in the hands of a woman what tortures might she not cause him, how entirely would he be at her mercy! How he would have suffered that very night if he had been married, and if his wife, instead of rejoicing over

his success, had been flirting with some other man, and making her husband ridiculous in the sight of the whole audience. Under the influence of this awful thought the dream of warm fingers twined within his own, the vision of a bright head on his shoulder melted rapidly away, and he thanked the fates that he was still alone and free.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Cecily came down to breakfast the morning after the first performance of "Noughts and Crosses," she looked anxiously round the table, and then asked what had become of the newspaper.

"Kate has taken it," replied Margaret. "She had to go off in a hurry to interview somebody. But I glanced through it first, and there was nothing in it."

"Oh, of course, people always say that after they have read a paper," returned Cecily, with pardonable irritation. "Surely there must have been some notice of the play?"

"Oh, yes, the usual sort of thing. Lots of praise, a very little blame, and compliments all round to the actors."

Cecily, not feeling much the wiser for this explicit account, took out her purse and produced a penny.

“Peter, go out and get me a *Daily Telephone*, there’s a dear,” she said coaxingly.

“All right,” replied the boy. “I’ve got to fetch a piece of scrag for Irish stew, so I’ll get the paper at the same time.”

When Peter returned, bearing the scrag and the *Daily Telephone*, Cecily seized the latter and hastily turned it over until she arrived at the column devoted to dramatic criticism. The notice of “Noughts and Crosses” was extremely favourable; praise was bestowed in unstinted measure upon the plot, the dialogue and the majority of the *dramatis personæ*, but the writer, like the critical lady in the stalls, regarded the character of the heroine as the one unsatisfactory feature in an otherwise excellent play.

When Mr. Dormer desired to create a heroine, observed the critic, he evidently followed the same method as the German savant who intended to write an essay upon the camel, namely, locked himself into his study, and evolved the animal out of his inner consciousness.

Cecily’s cheeks grew hot as she read this disparaging comment. The overflowing meed of praise that had preceded it seemed to her no more than bare justice, while the flaw in the tribute offered to her hero

hurt her more than any personal affront to herself. She wondered whether Mr. Dormer had been annoyed by the criticism; she hoped that he had only treated the impertinence with dignified contempt.

When Dormer arrived according to his promise, Cecily was vexed to find herself more tongue-tied than ever in his presence, and quite unable to join in the discussion that presently arose upon the merits of his play. She did not choose to echo Madge's unintelligent praises, and it was impossible for her to emulate Kate's coolly critical tone. She fancied that Mr. Dormer must regard her as next door to an imbecile, little thinking that what seemed to him her modest diffidence constituted her most potent charm in his eyes. Miles, though he would never have confessed it, was afraid of women in general; he seldom felt quite at his ease with them, and he was haunted by a dreadful suspicion that they were aware of this weakness, and despised him for it. He had a humiliating consciousness, moreover, that he did not shine in society, for his brain was a slow worker, and the epigrams and repartees that sparkled in his works were the outcome of lonely walks and sleepless nights. True, he received many more invitations than he could accept, but that,

he knew, was merely a tribute to his literary lionhood, and no proof of personal popularity.

Cecily Tregarthen was one of the few women he knew who had never inspired him with fear, and his instinct told him that she liked and respected him as a man, and not merely as a writer of books and plays. Since he had been introduced to the Tregarthen family by a common friend, with the petition that he would give them a helping hand if he could, he had called at the flat from time to time, his own chambers being in the neighbourhood. He disapproved of Margaret, and he positively disliked Kate, but he told himself that he was sorry for "that nice youngest girl," and he had made more than one attempt to find employment for Peter.

Cecily was utterly taken aback when Miles suddenly turned to her, and said with a subtle change of tone :

"I should like to know which part struck you as the best."

In her embarrassment she was on the point of disgracing herself for ever by saying, "I don't know," when a happy inspiration came to her aid, and she answered with conviction :

"The scene in the conservatory between Mabel and Lester."

Now this was the principal love scene, and the one which the critics had been almost unanimous in characterising as the least successful in the whole play.

“Ah, then you didn't think my heroine such a poor creature after all,” said Dormer, his face lighting up with pleasure. “You know most people don't agree with you about the conservatory scene.”

“I don't care,” replied Cecily. “I thought it beautiful, and the heroine seemed quite real to me.”

“So she did to me,” admitted Miles. “Still, it may be that I did not succeed in treating the character so as to make her real to other people. But I am very glad to know that you approve of her, and of the conservatory scene, because it is quite possible that a young girl may have a truer instinct in such matters than a case-hardened critic.”

Cecily blushed with pleasure at his praise, though the next moment her heart sank a little as she reflected that his heroine, that faultily faultless young person of irreproachable demeanour, was probably his feminine ideal. Miles, meanwhile, was remarking to himself that the youngest Miss Tregarthen was an unusually charming girl. In spite of her objectionable sisters,

and the unfortunate circumstance that she was compelled to work for a living, she seemed to be gentle, modest and reserved, and though he would not accuse her of any unwomanly pretensions to intellectuality, she evidently possessed that delicate feminine intuition which is sometimes a surer guide than masculine knowledge or experience. How quick she had been to recognise the merits of his heroine and the charm of his love scene, points which had quite escaped the dull eyes of the professional critics.

The same evening as Dormer sat at work upon the novel that he had lately begun, the comparison of himself with the German savant returned to his mind, and he asked himself uneasily whether there might not be a measure of truth in the accusation. It was a fact that while the majority of his characters in both books and plays had been based upon, though not copied from living originals, his heroines had never existed save in his own imagination. They were all more or less faithful portraits of the ideal woman of his dreams. He was obliged to admit that these ladies had never been received with much favour by the public. His books were greater favourites with men who could appreciate their literary qualities than with the general reader. They had always sold fairly well, but they had never

run through a dozen editions in six months, like the novels that hit the feminine taste.

For the first time it occurred to him that he might stand a better chance of success if he were to study his heroine from the life. Hitherto he had never met any woman who so entirely satisfied his fastidious taste that he could regard her as in any degree the flesh and blood embodiment of his feminine ideal. But now a girl's portrait seemed graven upon the tablets of his mind. There was the little head poised like a flower upon the white throat, the grey eyes shining with unconscious sympathy, the dimple that woke in the soft cheek before a smile dawned upon the lips. It was the portrait of Cecily Tregarthen slightly idealised by his imagination. Could he do better, he asked himself suddenly, than take that sweet girl, who seemed the quintessence of all that was pure and womanly, as the original of his next heroine? In order to do this it would, of course, be necessary for him to make opportunities for studying her character and disposition. He would have to contrive excuses for calling more frequently at the Mansions, take his manuscripts in person instead of sending them by post, go to tea occasionally on Sundays, and perhaps escort the girls to a play or a concert. All this would involve a good deal of trouble

and waste of time, no doubt, but he reminded himself that no sacrifice was too great that was made in the interests of art.

In pursuance of this resolution he paid two visits at Marylebone Mansions in the course of the next ten days. But on neither of those occasions did he have much opportunity of prosecuting his study of feminine character. The first time that he called, ostensibly with a manuscript for Madge to copy, Kate and Peter were at home as well as his model, and the former took the lion's share of the conversation. His second visit, which he paid in the character of negotiator between Cecily and his publishers, was on a Sunday, when he found the Miss Tregarthens entertaining two or three friends at tea. On this occasion he managed to get Cecily to himself for a little while, and succeeded in making her talk about her hopes and ambitions with regard to her work. He congratulated himself upon the fact that her timidity was gradually wearing off, and he took unusual pains to draw her out and set her at her ease with him.

Still he was not satisfied with the progress he had made so far, and in the course of the week he came to the conclusion that he must try to arrange a *tête-à-tête* with the object of his study, who, it seemed probable,

would talk more freely to him if she were relieved of the presence of her elder sisters. He remembered having heard that Kate usually spent Saturday afternoon at the British Museum; therefore if he were to send a concert ticket to Margaret for the following Saturday, there would be every reason to hope that he might find Cecily alone.

This plan he carried out to the letter, and felt not a little pride in his own ingenuity when, on calling at the Mansions the next Saturday afternoon, he was informed by the maid-servant that only Miss Cecily was at home. It was by no means in accordance with his sense of what was fitting and seemly that a young girl should receive male visitors unchaperoned, but he felt sure that Cecily only committed this breach of decorum out of ignorance of social usage, and he was not above taking advantage of her ignorance to further the interests of his book.

“I am so sorry both my sisters are out,” said Cecily rather nervously, as she shook hands with her visitor. “But I expect Madge will be home by half-past five. She has gone to St. James’ Hall with the ticket you kindly sent her. Kate is at the Museum as usual.”

“I’m sorry to miss them,” returned Miles politely.

“But perhaps you won’t mind putting up with me for a little while.”

“Putting up with you!” she echoed, a little dimple suddenly appearing near the corner of her mouth. “Do people generally find much difficulty in putting up with you?”

“I fancy young ladies think me rather a bore,” he went on. “I don’t know what to talk to them about, and they naturally consider me stupid and tiresome.”

“How can you say such things?” she exclaimed indignantly, defending him, as it were, against his own accusations. “They are probably overcome by the honour of talking to a distinguished author.”

“But I don’t care to be regarded only in the light of an author,” he said, his face clouding a little. “People seem to think that if a man writes books he cannot be a human being as well.”

“I don’t,” returned Cecily. “I am sure that a man cannot write books worth reading unless there is much of the human being in him. He must have felt and suffered, as well as seen and heard a great deal.”

“Suffered! Yes,” remarked Miles rather grimly. “The education of suffering is the cheapest and the most easily procured that I know of. I have graduated in that school like other men.”

He was surprised at his own words the moment he had uttered them. He had come to the house with the intention of making Cecily talk about herself, and here was he, who scarcely ever spoke of his own feelings or experiences, actually beginning to confide in his girl-hostess.

“The school of suffering doesn’t seem to have hardened you as it does some people,” she said. “I think it has made you better able to feel for other people, and more ready to help them.”

It was evident that she was only saying what she honestly thought and believed, without any intention of flattering her visitor’s vanity. Before Miles could answer, the servant appeared with the tea-tray, and Cecily going to the table, began to pour out the tea. As Miles sat and watched her an indefinable sense of comfort and well-being stole over him. It struck him as strange and at the same time very pleasant that he and she should be having tea alone together in that little room. The idea that had occurred to him as he drove home from the theatre after the first performance of his play returned to his mind. Again he wondered how he should feel if he were married, and this were his young wife making tea for him after his long day’s labour. In imagination he seemed to hear that vision-

ary wife questioning him about his work, hoping that he was not doing too much, begging him not to over-tire himself, for her sake as well as his own.

Under the influence of this idea he forgot all about his social duties, but sat gazing steadily at Cecily, whose colour came and went under his unconscious scrutiny, and whose eyes were rivetted upon her teatray. Presently she rose, and brought him a cup of tea. As he took it their fingers met, and he awoke from the dream to the reality. He was only a visitor in this, as in every other house, and to this girl he was no more than a mere acquaintance. Perhaps she was already tired of him and looking forward to the time when he should take his departure. A sudden feeling of forlornness and desolation came over him, as he realised that there was no one in the world who cared for him first and best, no human heart in which he reigned as monarch by the right divine of love.

He looked up at Cecily as he took the cup from her hand with a wistful expression like that of a dog which is pleading for something, but which has no words wherein to frame its petition. Miles knew that he wanted something, but he had not yet any clear idea what it was, and he was as incapable as a dumb animal of asking for it. Cecily stood still for a moment,

glancing down at him irresolutely, a longing to help and comfort him in her heart.

“You look very tired,” she said at length. “I hope you are not working too hard.”

Miles started, for those were the very words he had fancied a possible wife might address to him as she gave him his tea in his own home. It was curious how that vision of feminine love and solicitude haunted him as he sat apparently listening to Cecily's remarks, though he had not the faintest idea what she was talking about. So real had the dream become, that he felt it would be a perfectly natural proceeding if he were to get up and say:

“Now, my dear, I must go back to the study, and get on with my work.”

He wondered what Cecily, or rather his imaginary wife, would reply. Would she beg him to stay and talk to her a little longer, and tell him how lonely she was without him, or would she encourage him to go on with his work, and suppress all personal hopes and wishes in her unselfish desire for his success? As he looked questioningly across at his hostess, it suddenly dawned upon him that she was sitting quite silent with a little flush upon her cheeks, and a troubled look in her eyes. He jumped up in embarrass-

ment, scarcely knowing where he was or what he was saying.

"I'm afraid I've been dreadfully rude," he exclaimed. "But the fact is, from living so much alone I get absent fits sometimes which make me quite unfit for human society. You see I was speaking no more than the truth when I told you that I was too dull and stupid to get on with young ladies."

"You have never been anything but kind and pleasant to me," said Cecily, an unmistakable ring of sincerity in her tones. "I saw that you were thinking of something else just now, so I held my tongue for fear my chatter should lose you a valuable idea."

"It is very good of you to forgive me," said Miles, holding out his hand.

"Must you go?" she asked. "I thought perhaps you would wait till Madge came home."

Her words might have been inspired by mere conventional politeness, but he fancied that he could detect a note of genuine regret in her tone. His empty heart, his long-repressed emotions, began slowly to awaken at the strange delicious thought that this beautiful young creature had a kindly feeling for him, that she was glad to have him with her, sorry when he parted from her.

“Would you rather I stayed?” he asked in a husky voice that he scarcely recognised as his own.

“Yes,” answered Cecily quite simply, looking him straight in the face with her truthful eyes.

She had scarcely uttered the little monosyllable than everything became clear to Miles. He knew what it was he wanted of her, what it was that she could give him if she would. But the shy reserved man, who had never been a favourite with women, found it impossible to believe that there was any hope of his attaining his desire, while his whole nature shrank from the possibility of receiving a repulse.

“You—you couldn’t care for me a little, could you?” he asked in the same uncertain, quavering tones.

The wistfulness of his glance, the timid longing in his words, went straight to the girl’s impulsive heart, and kindled a flame therein.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, her eyes and mouth opening simultaneously at the suddenness of the revelation that forced itself upon her. “I believe I could!”

CHAPTER VII.

IT was characteristic of both the man and the woman that he should have asked for a confession of love, and that she should have given it, before he made any avowal of his own feelings. Miles never could quite remember what happened next, for the assurance that he was beloved went to his head like new wine. But a few moments later he found himself sitting in an easy-chair with Cecily in his arms. Her face was hidden on his shoulder, and he was kissing her hair, and murmuring at intervals :

“I love you—I love you—I love you.”

He, who had always prided himself on his command of language, could not for the moment think of anything else to say; the rest of his extensive vocabulary had gone completely out of his head. He felt as if he had forgotten all he ever knew, as if he were ignorant of everything save the one exquisite fact that he loved and was beloved.

As he grew somewhat calmer, he began to long for the sight of the face and the sound of the voice that now belonged to him alone, had been created, it appeared, for his sovereign pleasure. He put his hand under Cecily's chin and turned her face up to his. Her cheeks were pale, and her eyes looked heavy and half-dazed, like the eyes of a woman who has just awoke out of a long sleep. As she smiled back at him with the frankness of a happy child, he could read her heart like an open book, and he realised that she had given herself to him with completest self-surrender. Even in that moment of perfect happiness he could not help remembering the conduct of his latest heroine when going through a similar experience, her bashful flutterings, her maidenly reserve, and the admirable sentiments to which she gave utterance as she gently rebuked her young lover for his too impetuous method of courtship. Had the critics been justified in their disparaging comments on the lady's behaviour after all, or—and his heart stood still at the thought—was Cecily's happy fearlessness due to the fact that this was not her first experience of the tender passion, that she had played a leading part before in the drama of love?

“Cecily,” he exclaimed, his anxiety betraying itself

in his voice, "have you ever cared for any man before?"

"Never," she replied with perfect truth, for though she had often played at sentiment no man had ever touched her heart.

"No other man has ever kissed you, or held you in his arms?" demanded Miles.

There was a scarcely perceptible pause, and then Cecily answered steadily as she looked him straight in the eyes:

"No, you are the first."

It was a lie, but at that moment she would have committed a crime to keep the treasure she had so newly won. The truth, she was persuaded, would have lost her the love of her hero, who had so unexpectedly stooped from his pedestal to raise her to his side; but as she uttered the denial, she made a mental vow that though he was not the first lover he should be the last.

"Darling, no one could look in your eyes and doubt it," exclaimed Miles rapturously, as he pressed his cheek to hers. "How soft your cheeks are," he went on, in a tone of surprise, as though he had expected to find them hard or rough. As a matter of fact everything about her seemed new and wonderful now that

he realised that she and all her beauty and sweetness were really his.

“You have such lovely hair,” he murmured, as a coil slipped down and fell upon his hand.

She twisted the shining strand round his wrist.

“Now I have caught you in my chains,” she cried, with a little laugh. “You will never be able to get away again.”

Her laughter rang strangely in her lover's ears. His ideal heroine was always in such deadly earnest; she wept often, and fainted occasionally, but he could not remember that he had ever permitted her to laugh.

“As if I needed any chains to keep me by you,” he said, pressing his lips to her hair. “My sweetheart, my wife.”

It had just occurred to him that so far he had asked Cecily for nothing but her kisses, a fact which might cause them some embarrassment if they were to be surprised in their present position. A delicious tremor ran through him as he uttered the words “My wife”; they sounded to him so solemn and beautiful. To Cecily, however, they came like a breath of chill air on the first glow of her happiness. Marriage meant commonplace cares, duties and anxieties, when she desired nothing but love, caresses, and freedom to rejoice in

her youth. At her lover's words the recollection of certain married couples of her acquaintance forced itself upon her mind; the bored indifferent husband, the stout uninteresting wife, with their spoilt children, squabbles about bills, and endless household worries. Consequently she did not respond with any enthusiasm to Miles's last remark.

"Oh, don't call me your wife," she exclaimed; "it sounds so dull and middle-aged. Call me your sweetheart as often as you like."

"But we are engaged, aren't we?" put in Miles with some anxiety. "You will be my wife some day?"

"Oh yes, some day," said Cecily easily. "But we needn't think about it now; we have plenty of time before us, and we are so happy as we are. Oh dear, it's striking half-past five, and Madge will be in directly."

"Then give me a kiss," returned Miles, with apparent irrelevance, though, as Cecily complied with his request, he felt that he had never made a more appropriate remark.

A few minutes later the sound of a key turning in the lock roused the lovers from their happy absorption in each other, and their forgetfulness of all the world besides. Cecily sprang out of Miles's arms, and rushing

to the glass, pinned up the fallen lock, and smoothed down her ruffled curls. Madge's surprise at finding Mr. Dormer *tête-à-tête* with her sister quickly changed to a suspicion that something unusual had occurred, while the suspicion gave way to sisterly rejoicings at the news which Miles announced to her. An engagement, whether it came to anything or not, was always an interesting and exciting event in Madge's eyes, and she was a young woman of experience in such matters, having been engaged more than once herself to various members of "the service." From her delighted congratulations Miles presently escaped, after arranging to come the following afternoon and take Cecily for a walk in the Park.

The news of the engagement was received with less enthusiasm by the other two members of the family. Peter expressed his opinion, in Cecily's absence, that Mr. Dormer, though "not a bad sort of chap in his way," was too old and too solemn for his sister, while upon Margaret remarking that Cecily was a very lucky girl, Kate burst forth indignantly:—

"Lucky! Lucky to lose her liberty, and all chance of doing anything in the world at two-and-twenty! You will see, her talent will be completely thrown away. She will become a mere appendage to that man,

the wife of his bosom, the mother of his children, and nothing more."

"And enough too," said Madge sturdily. "After all, even you must admit that marriage is the most natural lot for a woman."

"I don't admit anything of the sort," retorted Kate. "Monogamous marriage happens to be the custom of the country, but custom is not nature, though thanks to woman's fatal adaptability it is apt to become second nature. If celibacy became the fashion the women who married would be considered objectionably eccentric, while if polygamy should ever be legalised in England people would declare that it was woman's natural lot to be one of half-a-dozen wives. If she wanted to have a husband to herself she would be called a 'new woman' or a 'shrieking sister.' I believe there is more cant talked about women than about any other subject under the sun."

"Well, I can't argue about it," said Madge good-humouredly, as delightful visions of long days spent in choosing new clothes floated through her brain. "All I know is that Cecily is very happy and I am very pleased, and that is enough for me."

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When Miles arrived at Marylebone Mansions the

next afternoon he found that Cecily's family had considerably taken themselves out of the way, and left her to receive him alone. She was more shy with him than she had been on the previous day, and seemed anxious to set out at once for their walk. But Miles was in no hurry to leave the quiet little room where he had his sweetheart to himself. He wanted a repetition of the delights of the day before, delights that more than once during the past night he had feared to wake and find only an exquisite dream.

"Sit down and talk to me for a little while," he said, trying to remove Cecily's hat with clumsy fingers, and surprised to find that it was pinned to her hair. "I want you to tell me why you were awake so late last night."

"How did you know I was?" asked Cecily.

"Because lovers are foolish creatures, darling, a fact that I have just been proving in my own person. Last night as I was walking home after dining at the club I saw a fire-engine tearing up Regent Street. Though it might have been on its way to any house in North London, a horrible fear seized me lest it should be going to Marylebone Mansions, so I took a cab to this door to satisfy myself that all was right. There was no fire, but there was a light in one of these rooms. I

thought perhaps you were ill, so I walked up and down till the light was put out, which was not until two o'clock, and then I went home."

"The light was in my room," said Cecily, laughing. "But Kate sleeps with me, and she usually reads some abstruse book till the small hours of the morning. I wish I had known you were outside; I should have come and peeped at you through the curtain."

"You darling!" he exclaimed, clasping her in his arms. "Do you know, Cecily, I must warn you that I am of a fearfully jealous disposition. I don't believe I should have fallen in love with you if I had not guessed that no other man had ever caressed you, and I expect I shall be a regular Bluebeard of a husband. I feel as if I should like to practise Merlin's charm upon you, the charm of 'woven paces and waving hands,' by virtue of which no man would see you more, nor you see any man but me."

"Ah," said Cecily, whose cheek had turned suddenly pale. "But the woman on whom the charm was worked 'lay as dead, and lost all use of life.' You wouldn't wish me such a fate as that?"

"As long as you were alive to me, your husband, your life would be put to its best and sweetest use," replied Miles. "However, unfortunately, the charm is

lost, and I cannot prevent other men from seeing you. But unless you always love me first and best, we shall both of us live to repent that we ever met."

"Of course I shall always love you first and best," she answered. "But don't let us be so tragic. I want you to take me across the park to Mrs. Marchmont's house in Cornwall Gardens. You are to leave me at her door, because I want to tell her all about—about you and me. She is the best friend I have in the world. Ever since we came to London she has taken me about with her, and lent me things when I had nothing to wear, and been as kind to me as if she were my elder sister."

"Then she and I must be friends," said Miles, as he followed Cecily down the stairs. "I have met her occasionally, and always felt sorry for her, because she has such a little blackguard of a husband."

"Yes, poor dear," exclaimed Cecily mournfully. "And she is so good and brave; I have never heard her utter a word of complaint. And yet it must be so awful to have a husband like Mr. Marchmont. I would far rather live and die an old maid than marry a man who was not as good as—as you."

"I wish we were in a wood," returned Miles, who felt that under the circumstances it was very incon-

siderate of the public to throng the streets. "But I don't know why you should think me good. I have told you that I am very jealous, and now I am going to ask you something which will probably make you consider me a very fussy, tiresome person."

"What is it?" she asked rather anxiously. "Break it to me gently."

"Well, in the first place I want you to give up sitting to Fleming. I don't know anything definite against him, but he has the reputation of being a queer wild sort of fellow, and I don't like the idea of your running in and out of his studio by yourself."

"Oh, is that all?" said Cecily, much relieved. "I decided at the last sitting that I would only give him one more. He has been away lately, but when he comes back I am going for a final *séance*. His sister is generally there, you know."

"I should hope so," returned Miles. "But that isn't all, Cecily. If you wish to please me you won't go out alone more than you can help. I shall probably be able to take you out nearly every afternoon, but when I am not able to go with you, perhaps you could get Peter or one of your sisters to accompany you."

“Of course I wish to please you,” she said, a little taken aback at this proposed curtailment of her freedom. “But in our circumstances a chaperon is generally looked upon as a superfluous luxury. It is often a choice between going out alone, and not going out at all. Still, I would rather be shut up all day than do anything to vex you. So I promise that I will not go out alone oftener than I can possibly help.”

“Thank you, dearest,” he said, inwardly congratulating himself upon having secured such a sweet, yielding creature for his wife. “And you know you can put an end to the present state of things whenever you please. You seem to dislike the idea of a speedy marriage, yet what have we to wait for? I am not a rich man, but I am making a very fair income now, and I would insure my life for your benefit, as well as settle upon you what little money I have of my own. I am so much older than you, and I have had so little happiness in the past; why should we remain apart longer than is absolutely necessary? You could be ready to marry me in a month, couldn't you? and then we could go abroad while our house was being prepared for us.”

“Oh, don't talk about anything so prosy as houses and settlements,” exclaimed Cecily with a touch of

petulance. "We are very well as we are; why should we tempt Providence by trying to improve our condition? Remember, when a man marries his troubles begin; much more a woman's. Tell me you love me, and don't hint at anything so dreadful as insuring your life."

"You know I love you with all my heart," replied Miles fervently. "But that is just the reason why I want no more partings, no more good-byes. However, we won't talk about it now if you don't wish it. You have been a good girl to give in about the other matters."

"It is not a question of giving in," she said, slightly ruffled by his tone. "It is my pleasure to do as you wish. I do it of my own free will, out of love to you."

"Well, the motive doesn't much matter," he answered, laughing, "as long as the result is satisfactory. Now I suppose we must say good-bye, if I am really to leave you at Mrs. Marchmont's door. To-morrow I am coming in the morning, because I want to take you out to lunch with my half-sister, Mrs. Bingley. She is very anxious to make your acquaintance."

"Is she like you? Shall I get on with her?" asked Cecily rather nervously.

“I don't think she is much like me, but she is a very sensible woman, and what used to be called a notable housewife. She will be able to give you plenty of useful advice when you have a house and servants of your own.”

“That will be very kind of her,” said Cecily, though she did not look particularly delighted at the prospect.

CHAPTER VIII.

“So the first volume has come to an end, and the second volume is just beginning,” said Mrs. Marchmont, a pretty, pale woman of about eight-and-twenty, when Cecily had announced her news. “Do you know I fancied that Jasper Fleming was going to be the hero of your life’s romance.”

“Oh no,” said Cecily, blushing rather uncomfortably. “He is very nice, but he is not my idea of a husband. I think that marriage, especially for a woman who has been silly and thoughtless in her youth, ought to be a fresh start in life. I always hoped that I should marry a wise, strong man who would teach me to become wise and strong too.”

“Wisdom and strength are not the qualities men generally desire in their wives,” said Mrs. Marchmont, with a faint sneer. “Don’t cherish too many illusions about your future husband, my dear, or the disappointment will be all the more bitter when you find out that he is a mere man after all.”

“I have no illusions about Miles, and he will never disappoint me,” said Cecily stoutly. “I know his only two faults already. He has told me that he is jealous, and I have found out that he likes his own way.”

“And he doesn’t forgive easily; I can read that in his face. You will have to mind your p’s and q’s, my dear girl, when you are Mrs. Dormer. No more flirtations, no more indiscretions, no more escapades, but, on the contrary, a tame and sober existence with a strict observance of all social laws and conventions. I fancy that your Miles sacrifices at the altar of the Goddess Grundy.”

“Then that proves that the Goddess Grundy is a very nice person,” said Cecily. “I am tired of doing as I like. I shall do what Miles likes in the future; he will be my conscience.”

“And when are you going to take your conscience for better for worse?”

“Oh, not for ages; a year, perhaps, or more. There is no hurry.”

Rosamund Marchmont laughed. “You are quite right,” she said. “It is far better to be engaged than married to a conscience. Then you can always escape from it if it pricks you unpleasantly. Have you been introduced to any new relations yet?”

“No, Miles is going to take me to lunch with his half-sister, Mrs. Bingley, on Tuesday. He says she will give me good advice about housekeeping.”

“Poor Cecily! Yes, Mrs. Bingley is understood to have the whole theory of domestic management at her finger-ends. You will have lectures on the iniquity of tradespeople, the short-comings of servants, and the proper training of children, with object-lessons in the same. I lunched with her once. Again I say, poor Cecily!”

On her return home Cecily found a note awaiting her, the sight of which gave her a little shock of uneasiness and remorse. It was from Jasper Fleming, and stated that he had returned the night before from Paris, and hoped that she would come to the studio for a lesson or a sitting the next morning. Cecily, in the first agitation of her new happiness, had succeeded in putting Mr. Fleming and the possible pain that her engagement might cause him out of her head. At the bottom of her heart she knew that his feeling for her, whether consciously or not, was something more than the playful friendship that she had tried to believe it. The recollection of her behaviour to him as well as to other admirers oppressed her now, and took off the edge

of her delight in Miles's love. She had not meant to do wrong, or to make any one unhappy, but she realised for the first time that she had often acted thoughtlessly and selfishly in giving encouragement to men who were indifferent to her, that she had taken a mischievous pleasure in playing with fire, and, knowing that her own fingers were safe, had felt but little pity when a playmate was scorched.

This reprehensible conduct had been caused partly, no doubt, by the fact that she herself had never known a heart-ache. It had been so hard to believe that what was only play to her might mean suffering to another. Besides, it was almost impossible to one of Cecily's nature to treat with severity a man whose only fault was that he liked and admired her. She would tell herself that Mr. So-and-So merely meant to be kind and pleasant, and that, consequently, there was no need to snub his attentions; but when it became clear that he meant something more than kindness, she would feel bound to try and console him for his disappointment.

Now that she had learnt what love meant, however, all these little excuses and palliations faded away, and left her nothing but remorse for the follies and indiscretions of her girlhood. She had been obliged to lie to her lover in the first moment of their mutual happi-

ness, and the sweetness of his caresses was clouded by regret that she had not kept herself for him, that other men had had the first fruits of her lips. There would always be the possibility that Miles would find out that she had deceived him, that she was not the inexperienced girl he fondly thought her. She put the idea resolutely away from her, however. Miles would never find out, or if he did, he would have learnt to love and trust her so well by that time that he would certainly forgive her. She was determined never to cause him a moment's uneasiness, but to make him as good and faithful a wife as if she had really been the ideal maiden of his dreams.

It was with rather a sinking heart that Cecily set forth upon her last visit to the studio. She found Mr. Fleming alone, his sister, as he explained, being too unwell to see anyone that morning. Jasper, like his visitor, seemed in rather subdued spirits.

"I did not enjoy myself at all," he said, in answer to Cecily's inquiry about his stay in Paris. "But I made a discovery while I was away, a discovery that I want to tell you about this morning."

"I made a discovery, too, while you were away," remarked Cecily. "And I want to tell you about it this morning."

“Well, tell me yours first,” he said, “then the ground will be clear for my story.”

“No, I would rather you told me yours first,” returned Cecily, who welcomed the chance of postponing her announcement. “Mine will keep.”

“Very well then. Come and sit down here, and prepare for a shock.”

Cecily seated herself obediently and waited, but Jasper seemed to have a difficulty in beginning his tale.

“Well,” she said at length. “What is it?”

“It is this,” he answered, speaking with evident effort. “When I got to Paris, I discovered something that I ought to have known long ago—Oh, Cecily, can’t you guess what it was?”

The girl gave a little start of dismay.

“No, I can’t,” she said hastily; “and I don’t think I want to hear your discovery. I would rather tell you mine at once. It is that——”

“No, no, wait,” he cried. “Hear me out. I realised as soon as I was far away from you that I loved you, that you were the only woman in the world for me. I must tell you this even though you do not, and perhaps never may, care anything for me. But, Cecily, I want you to give me the chance of winning you.

Sometimes I have thought that you liked me a little, that you were glad to be with me, and as long as you are heart-whole, there is always the hope that I may be able to change your little liking into something warmer."

"Oh dear," exclaimed Cecily, jumping up from her chair, and going to the other side of the room. "How dreadful everything is! What a wicked girl I have been!"

Her conscience was reproaching her sharply for the encouragement that she had given her friend to think that she liked him a little, and even more than a little. She sat down by the table and leant her head on her hands in an attitude of despondency and self-abasement. Jasper, surprised and alarmed at her behaviour, came and stood beside her.

"What is it?" he inquired anxiously. "I am not asking you for anything now, dear. I only wanted to tell you what I felt for you. I shall be contented to wait months, or even years, on just a grain of hope that there might be a chance for me some day."

He felt considerably more confidence than his words implied. He knew that Cecily had enjoyed her visits to the studio, he knew that she had taken pleasure in his society, that she admired his talent, and was grate-

ful for his kindness, and sometimes he had fancied that she was growing to regard him with a yet warmer feeling. In short, there seemed to be no reason why he should not teach her the lesson of love.

“Cecily,” he urged as he stooped over her, “look up, and say that you are going to be kind to me.”

She raised a pale, penitent face to his. “I want you to forgive me,” she murmured. “I have behaved very badly, but I did not mean to make you unhappy. I did not know it myself till—till——”

“Know what?” he asked sharply, a sudden suspicion darting into his mind. “Not—not that there is some one else?”

Cecily dropped her head on her hands again, and the suspicion became a certainty. Jasper strolled across the room to the window, where he stood for a few moments in silence, staring intently at a milkman who was carrying on a promising flirtation with the cook at the opposite house. Why, he wondered vaguely, should the course of a milkman’s love run smooth when his own suffered shipwreck?

“Well,” he remarked, scarcely knowing what he said, “I ought to be very lucky at cards.”

There was another silence for a few moments, and then Jasper heard something like a subdued sniff, a

sound that instantly made him forget himself and his own disappointment.

“You’re not crying?” he said, hurrying across the room to the table where the girl still sat with her face bowed on her arms. “Cecily, you must not mind about me. It wasn’t your fault in the least. No one but a conceited ass would ever have thought you cared a pin about him. I always knew I wasn’t half good enough for you. You mustn’t make yourself unhappy, dear; I can’t bear to see you cry. Come, wipe your eyes, and tell me who the happy man is.”

Thus adjured, Cecily raised her head a little, and murmured in dolorous tones:

“Mr. Dormer.”

“Dormer!” exclaimed Jasper in surprise, and stopped himself just in time from saying, “That prig.” He had a slight acquaintance with Miles, and wondered what on earth Cecily could see to love in such a solemn, middle-aged young man. As he pondered over this question he remembered that Dormer must be making a very good income, and the idea occurred to him that in the Tregarthens’ circumstances that fact might have something to do with Cecily’s acceptance of so unsuitable a lover. Could it be possible that she really cared a little for him, Jasper, after all, and that

her tears were caused as much by sorrow for her own disappointment as for his? He cursed his own blindness in not having discovered his feelings before. If only he had told her that he loved her before he left England. Now, he supposed that it was too late.

“Are you—do you care for him?” he asked doubtfully.

As Cecily nodded in reply, a big tear splashed down upon the table, a tear that almost confirmed Jasper in his suspicions.

“Poor little girl,” he said involuntarily. “Are you going to be married soon?”

“Oh, no,” answered Cecily quickly. “It is to be a very long engagement.”

Jasper brightened up a little. Anything might happen in the course of a long engagement.

“Then you will be able to go on with your sittings?” he said more cheerfully.

“No, I shall not have time,” she replied. “And Mr. Dormer does not like my going out alone. I am very sorry to have to give up my visits, but I think it will be better that I should not come here again for the present. Dulcie will understand why I stay away.”

“She is afraid of herself,” thought Jasper with

melancholy satisfaction; "she cannot trust herself to see much of me. Why—why didn't I speak when she was still free?"

"Will you tell Dulcie my news?" went on Cecily, "and say good-bye to her for me. I am sorry she was not well enough to see me to-day. I ought to go home now. I hope you won't think anything more about me; I am not worth it."

"I shall always think about you," he said; "but as long as I can think that you are happy, that must be enough for me. If anything should ever occur to make you unhappy, if you should ever want the advice or help of a friend, promise that you will come to me. I shall always be ready and willing to do you service."

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Miles came to take his *fiancée* out to luncheon next day he found her in an unusually quiet, almost depressed state of mind.

“Is anything wrong, my darling?” he asked as they walked towards Westbourne Terrace, where Mrs. Bingley’s house was situated. “You seem rather out of spirits.”

“No, nothing is exactly wrong,” answered Cecily. “Only I have been wishing that I were more worthy of you. You don’t know how wicked I am.”

“I think I can guess,” he said, laughing. “You have been late for breakfast sometimes, and you have often thought about your new hat in church when you ought to have been listening to the sermon. Perhaps you may even have out-run your dress allowance when the shops have been particularly tempting. No doubt, those peccadilloes seemed like crimes to your tender

little conscience, but I am ready to give you absolution for them all."

"Thank you," said Cecily with a faint sigh. The impulse to confession had passed. She felt it to be impossible to enlighten Miles on the subject of her past misdeeds when she saw how far he was from suspecting the truth.

On their arrival at the house in Westbourne Terrace they were ushered, rather to Cecily's surprise, into a drawing-room which had obviously been neither swept nor dusted that morning. A newly-lighted fire was struggling for existence in the unpolished grate, and the air of the whole house seemed to be impregnated with the smell of boiled mutton. A heavy clumping overhead announced that the hostess was hastily attiring herself to receive her visitors, and at the end of ten minutes she made her appearance. Cecily was conscious of a little shock of disappointment as she found herself welcomed by a stout, florid, black-haired lady, dressed in a combination of fawn-colour and magenta. Mrs. Bingley had been considered a fine woman when she married, and she was a well-preserved woman still, her tight smooth skin being unmarked save by a few lines of worry about the opaque dark eyes and the thin-lipped mouth. Her face belonged to the type which has

been described as presenting a portrait rather than a record, and in her case the portrait was neither an interesting nor attractive one.

“You find me in rather a muddle,” she exclaimed breathlessly. “But the fact is, I have had to dismiss my cook at a moment’s notice, and the housemaid has given me warning in consequence—servants always hang together, you know—so I have had to get in a charwoman, who doesn’t know my ways.”

Cecily and Miles hastened to assure her that they quite understood, expressed their regrets for having inadvertently come at such an awkward time, and listened respectfully to Mrs. Bingley’s recital of her late cook’s misdeeds, and of her own astuteness in discovering them. Cecily’s attention wandered from time to time, but she gathered that the trouble had something to do with dripping, and culminated in the disappearance of a pound and a half of the best beef-steak, which treasure had been unearthed by its rightful owner under a pile of dish-cloths in the left-hand drawer of the kitchen dresser. Every now and then Miles, who seemed to be listening with the most conscientious attention to the unfolding of the tale, glanced at Cecily with an expression that seemed to say, “You see I was right when I told you that she was a domestic genius.”

Lunch was announced at last, and in the dining-room Cecily was introduced to Mr. Bingley, a little man with a conical-shaped head, short-sighted eyes, and a sandy beard. Two small Miss Bingleys also made their appearance in the charge of a cowed-looking governess. Cecily did not find her host very interesting, socially speaking, but her respect for him increased when she noticed the pleasant civility of his manner to the plain little governess, and her heart warmed towards him when she discovered that during the long pause between the disappearance of the meat and the arrival of the pudding, he was holding his little daughter's hand under the table. She made up her mind that he was one of those men in whom the paternal instinct is more highly developed than the conjugal, and as she observed the manner in which he looked at and addressed his Maria, it struck her that he regarded a wife as a disagreeable but necessary ingredient in the making of a home and the founding of a family.

Mrs. Bingley's contributions towards the conversation were chiefly composed of further reminiscences on the subject of the departed cook. A minute account of an altercation between that domestic and herself on the question of whose duty it was to "do the front hall" occupied the greater part of the luncheon-hour,

and was only cut short on the return of the ladies to the drawing-room by the arrival of the two nursery children, who claimed the visitor's whole attention. Cecily was not particularly struck by the manners or appearance of her prospective nephew and niece. The five-year-old girl was so shy that she could not be persuaded to leave the shelter of her mother's skirts, but the boy, who was a couple of years older, was proportionately bold and forward.

"You're our new aunt, ain't you?" he said, advancing upon Cecily with the air of a young bandit. "What presents have you brought us?"

Rather taken aback at this unexpected demand, Cecily explained that she was not yet his aunt, but that she would bring him a present next time she came, and inquired what he would like.

"I want a rocking-horse with harness that takes off, and a mail-cart to hold four," replied the young man without an instant's hesitation.

"There, that will do, Harold," put in his mother, glancing at Cecily as though to challenge her admiration for such a prodigy. "You know that I have told you it is naughty to tease people for things. Go and play with your bricks. He has such a spirit," she added, turning to her visitor, "He is getting quite

beyond nurse, and even I find him a handful when he is in one of his rampageous moods."

It appeared that Harold was in a rampageous mood that afternoon, for while his mother was entertaining her guests with a circumstantial account of the sayings and doings of the five children, their remarkable health and cleverness, and her own methods of nursery management, he amused himself by building a tall tower with his bricks, and then knocking the erection down with a deafening clatter.

"Not so much noise, darling," protested his mother at length. "The lady will think you quite a little bear."

"When is the lady going away?" asked Harold, scowling at Cecily.

"You mustn't ask rude questions," replied his fond parent. "Now play quietly, or I shall have to send you to nurse."

A few moments of peace and quiet were succeeded by a crash that made Cecily nearly jump out of her chair.

"Now, Harold, what did I say?" demanded his mother. "Go to nurse at once."

"Don't want to," whined Harold.

"You are a very naughty boy not to do what

mother says. Now go when I tell you. Do you hear me?"

But apparently Harold was deaf, for he refused to budge.

"Well, will you go if I give you a chocolate?" asked Mrs. Bingley, suddenly changing her tactics.

The boy considered a moment. "I'll go if you'll give me two large ones," was his ultimatum.

"Oh, anything to get rid of you," said his mother fretfully. "But I know you will be bilious to-morrow."

The chocolates were produced, and the rebel departed.

"It's no easy matter to manage a boy like that," remarked Maria. "It requires so much tact and firmness."

The weary visit came to an end at last, and Cecily took leave of her hostess with a joyful heart.

"I daresay you got a lot of useful hints from Maria," observed Miles cheerfully, as they walked away.

He looked so convinced of the success of the visit that Cecily had not the heart to tell him of her doubts of Mrs. Bingley's housewifely and maternal virtues.

“She certainly told me a good deal,” she returned evasively. “She seems to be much interested in domestic affairs.”

When the couple reached the Mansions they found the flat deserted. Madge had not been engaged twice herself without acquiring a knowledge of the needs of a pair of lovers.

“Now we can enjoy ourselves,” said Miles, sitting down and drawing Cecily on to his knee. “Do you know, darling, I have been thinking things over, and I have come to the conclusion that I cannot go on much longer in this vague indefinite way. I don’t want to hurry you, but I should like you to fix, at any rate, an approximate date for our marriage. At present I feel so unsettled and uncertain about everything. I am afraid of waking up some morning and finding that all my happiness was a dream.”

“You would be more likely to wake to that discovery if we were married,” replied Cecily. “At least if one may judge from the experiences of one’s friends. Think of Rosamund Marchmont, whose husband you said yourself was a blackguard, and think of all the prosy married couples you know, of whom the best that can be said is that they tolerate each other.

They are none of them happy like us; they none of them love as we do."

"You foolish child," he said, pulling one of the little curls that broke loose upon the nape of her neck. "Our case would be quite different from any of theirs. I should not turn out a blackguard, and no life could be prosy in which you had a part. It is not like you to be self-willed and unreasonable, dearest. Come, be good, and say that the wedding shall be this day month."

"No, no," she cried, with a shudder, "I couldn't—I really couldn't."

"I don't understand you," he said, beginning to feel both hurt and angry. "There must be something behind all this. If you love me as well as you profess to do, you must have some reason for wishing to defer our marriage, which you have not told me. Please let me hear it now."

"I don't like to tell you," murmured Cecily, letting her head drop on his shoulder.

"But you must; don't be afraid, sweet one. I like to know everything that is passing in your little mind."

"Well then," she said, with the sudden frankness of desperation. "I daresay you will think me horrid, but if you must know, it is because I don't want to

die just when I am so happy, and I am dreadfully afraid of suffering."

"Die! Suffering! What are you talking about?" exclaimed Miles, beginning to fear that his *fiancée* had taken leave of her wits.

"Oh, can't you understand! Do men never realise how much more serious a matter marriage is for girls than for them? Does it never occur to them that when a woman marries she risks her life, and accepts the practical certainty of having to undergo the most terrible of all suffering? You pretend to love me, and yet you are anxious to expose me to all that."

"Oh," said Miles, drawing a long breath, as the look of mystification and alarm died away from his face. "I never knew that girls thought about such things. It is the decree of Nature you know, dear, that women should bear children. We cannot alter Nature's laws."

"No, but if Nature chooses to punish us so cruelly for carrying on the race, she cannot be surprised if we shrink from marriage."

Miles looked puzzled. He had been accustomed to talk about the blessed privileges of maternity with the comfortable fluency of one who knows that he will never be called upon to share those privileges and their

attendant pains, while he had always fancied that every woman worthy of the name wished for children, just as ever girl-child craved for dolls. It struck him with a sense of surprise and injury that his feminine ideal would never have talked as Cecily had just done. Still, his real sweetheart was so much more charming in every other way than his ideal that he could not bring himself to be angry with her.

“When a woman cares very much for a man,” he said gently, “she generally thinks that his love and the prospective love of her children more than counterbalance all the danger and suffering.”

“But men very often take a dislike to their wives when they see them looking ugly and repulsive,” put in Cecily. “And the children turn out badly, or die just as their mothers have begun to look upon them as the only comfort they have left.”

“That is taking a morbid view of the matter. You surely cannot think that I should ever love you the less because you were the mother of my children; and as for disappointment and death, we cannot guard against them whatever lot we may choose. And I firmly believe that the family life is the best that the world has to offer both to men and women, in spite of the occasional suffering and anxiety that it may entail.”

Cecily made no reply, but Miles knew by the movement of her shoulders that she was crying. He sat in silence for a moment, wondering how he was to reconcile his sweetheart to the "august martyrdom of maternity." Reasoning seemed to have no effect; therefore he decided to try another method.

"Dearest love," he murmured, clasping her more closely in his arms, "you don't know how happy it would make me if I felt that we were together, never to be parted again. I am so much older than you, and I have led such a lonely life all these years. I am longing for my home and my wife, and you—ah, Cecily—how can you have the heart to send me back to those empty rooms alone?"

CHAPTER X.

Two months later the lovers were married. Circumstances had combined to further Miles's wishes, and to overrule Cecily's objection to an early marriage. In the first place, Madge, unable to endure the sight of a love-drama in which she did not play the principal part, and thoroughly weary of her daily performance on the typewriter, suddenly decided to accept the fourth proposal of a three times rejected but not disheartened major. This faithful swain was approaching middle-age and unromantic in appearance, but he was good-tempered, his income was handsome, and he hinted at further expectations. Altogether, Madge thought that Fergus would be kind, and that she would be comfortable, a sufficient basis in her opinion for matrimonial happiness. The major's regiment was going out to India in the autumn, and as he had influential friends among tea and coffee planters, he good-naturedly suggested that Peter should accompany

himself and Madge, and look in the East for that berth which had eluded all search in the West.

The home being thus prospectively broken up, Kate decided to take bachelor lodgings somewhere between the British Museum and Fleet Street, a region which, in her eyes, constituted the centre of the universe, and Cecily saw no course open to her but to consent to enter the perilous yet prosaic state of matrimony on the same day as her sister. Accordingly the double wedding took place in July, and immediately afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Dormer left England for the Continent.

For three long delightful months, the pair wandered together through foreign lands, going whither they would, staying where they pleased, free from the jars and rubs of every day existence, alone with their love, undisturbed in their happiness. There was scarcely a day or an hour in which Miles did not discover some new and delightful trait in his wife's mind or disposition. He had known that her temper was sweet, and that she was naturally unselfish and pliable, but he soon perceived that her character was neither weak nor colourless. She had her own likes, ideas, and opinions, but she yielded to his wishes because she loved him, and deferred to his opinions because she believed in him.

The discovery of her bright intelligence and curiously receptive mind was a continual source of astonishment to him. He had neither expected nor desired to find a mental companion in his wife, for a clever woman was his bugbear, but he could not deny that life was infinitely pleasanter and more amusing when it was shared with a lively quick-witted girl who, thanks to her feminine adaptiveness and powers of intuition, picked up ideas and assimilated information with an ease that seemed to him almost uncanny. It was true that such knowledge as she did possess was superficial, and that, thanks to a thoroughly defective education, her ignorance on many subjects was positively abysmal, but she showed an extraordinary faculty for making the most of her newly-gained ideas, and turning them to the very best account. After a couple of months in Italy her appreciation of the methods and characteristics of the old masters bade fair to eclipse his own carefully-acquired artistic knowledge, while with a few idioms, a little patois, and a great deal of gesticulation she could always make herself understood by the natives before he had framed his first sentence of classical Italian. All this was quite wrong from the feminine ideal point of view, yet he was compelled to admit that he had never enjoyed himself so much in his life.

It promised well for the continuation of his happiness that Cecily showed none of the young wife's jealousy of her husband's work. On the contrary, she was even more anxious than himself that he should win a greater meed of fame in the future, and infinitely prouder of what he had accomplished in the past. Whenever they stayed more than a day or two in one place, she unpacked his writing materials, and insisted upon his sitting down to a good morning's work. And Miles, who had been a writer and nothing but a writer long enough to have acquired a touch of the "ink-craving," needed but little persuasion. It quickly became clear to him that he was working better during those holiday weeks than he had done at any period in his previous career. His was the mastery of word and phrase, the gift of imagination, the power of selection, the knowledge of men, and now to these good things were added the tenderness, the sympathy, and the insight into feminine nature that can only be learnt in the school of love. One unlooked-for difficulty, however, he found to be inseparable from his project of sketching his new heroine from his wife instead of from an ideal of his own conception.

"Do you know you are giving me a great deal of trouble?" he said to Cecily one day, at the close of a

morning's work. "You have compelled me to change nearly the whole plot of my book. According to my original plan the heroine had to undergo many trials and much tribulation, and the story ended badly. But now I can't bring myself to make her very miserable because she looks at me so reproachfully with your eyes. I have had to lighten her troubles, and even allow her to live happily ever after. But that involves the rewriting of all that I had done before I knew you."

"Oh, what a pity!" said Cecily regretfully. "I give you free leave to treat me as badly as you like in fiction. You may throw me off horses, upset me out of boats, and even put a rope round my neck and sell me at Smithfield, as long as you are always nice to me in real life."

Only one slight passing cloud marred the perfect serenity of the long honeymoon. It was the third Sunday after their marriage, and the couple were at Florence. As they sat at breakfast Miles suddenly asked:

"Wouldn't you like to go to church this morning, Cecily? You haven't been since we left England, and I believe there is a fairly good service here."

“If you wish to go, Miles, I should like to go with you. I didn't know you ever went to church.”

“No, I don't. But I thought you did.”

“Yes, we always went as long as we lived at Chatham, and when we came to London we began by going to a different church every Sunday, and we heard something different at each. One clergyman told us that all men except a select few would go to hell, and another that there was no such place. A third said that it was wicked not to pray for rain, and a fourth that we ought only to pray for spiritual blessings. Some told us that everything that happened had been predestined from the beginning of the world, and others that every man could make his own fate, and was the master of his circumstances. Then they all interpreted the Bible in different and often contradictory ways, so at last I got quite confused and disheartened, and I gave up going to church or reading the Bible. But now if you will tell me what you believe, I will believe it too. Your faith shall be my faith, and your God my God.”

“That is impossible,” he said. “A man hammers out his faith, such as it is, by means of long years of thought and reading. A woman cannot do that, and therefore she must believe what she is told. In any

case the faith of a thinking man would not be definite enough for her. She requires dogmas, symbols, and ceremonies."

Cecily looked sad.

"I am sorry that we must be separated in our religion," she said mournfully. "Do you think there will be a little heaven for women, and a big one for men?"

"I can't say," replied Miles. "But there is another reason for feminine orthodoxy. A woman must take her children to church, teach them the catechism, and tell them about little Samuel and David and Bathsheba. An agnostic child would be a monster, worse than an agnostic woman. So when we settle down at home, Cecily, I will take a sitting for you at the nearest church, and you had better believe what the clergyman tells you. If you never go anywhere else you won't hear him contradicted."

"Won't you ever go with me?"

"Oh, yes, now and then," he answered reluctantly, for he was too honest not to shrink from appearing to profess a religion whose dogmas he did not believe. "At any rate I will take you to the door, and come and fetch you afterwards."

"Well, I will go to church every Sunday to please

you," said Cecily. "I would attend meetings of the Salvation Army if I knew you wished it."

Unfortunately, the motto of Warren Hastings' adoption, "This too will pass," applies to honeymoons as well as to less agreeable periods of life, and by the middle of October the Dormers were back in town. They were saved the trouble of house-hunting and furnishing by the opportunity that offered itself of taking over a furnished house in Camden Gardens, which belonged to an artist friend of Miles, who found himself obliged to economise on the Continent. The house was comfortable, the furniture was in good taste, and the couple were not sorry to settle down in a home of their own, even though they felt some regrets that they could no longer be sufficient unto themselves, but must, in a measure at least, come back to the world, submit to visit and be visited, and recognise the claims of friends, relations, and society in general.

Cecily was brought down to earth somewhat roughly in the course of an early visit from her sister-in-law, Mrs. Bingley. That lady, who had been in the country when the Dormers first returned to town, made her appearance at eleven o'clock one morning, when they had been settled about a fortnight in their new home. She was accompanied by a small child, who had to be

refreshed with cake and provided with a picture-book before her elders could indulge in any conversation. As soon, however, as Miss Tottie was happily engaged in crumbling cake over a valuable illustrated book, Mrs. Bingley opened fire with the inquiry :

“ Well, and how are you getting on with your housekeeping? I daresay you still feel quite at sea.”

“ No, I find it easier than I expected,” answered Cecily, inwardly wondering at the fascination which the more sordid details of life possess for a certain order of mind. “ The cook seems a good manager, and with her help I have got on very well so far.”

“ Ah, I shouldn't put too much faith in the help of cooks,” observed Mrs. Bingley with a grim smile. “ Does your husband give you an allowance for the housekeeping?”

“ No, we pay all our bills weekly, and Miles and I go through the books on Monday mornings. Of course I could do it alone, but we like doing things together.”

“ H'm,” said Maria, “ I don't hold with paying bills weekly. The tradespeople are much more civil and supply you with better goods if you keep a running account. And I should certainly advise you to

have an allowance for housekeeping. Then you can pinch a bit when you and your husband are alone, and make more of a dash when you have company. A man is none the better for living well every day; he only gets bilious."

"Pinch Miles!" cried Cecily, in horror-stricken tones. "Why, I would rather never ask a guest to the house from one year's end to another than entertain at the cost of his discomfort."

"Ah, you're young," said Mrs. Bingley indulgently. "You will soon grow out of those ideas. By the way, my dear, I think you make a mistake in having such a good-looking parlour-maid. It's never safe where there's a man in the house."

"But we don't keep a man," answered Cecily innocently.

"But I suppose you call your husband a man."

"Miles!" exclaimed the young wife with an indignant flush. "Do you mean to suggest that there would be any danger to Miles from a good-looking parlour-maid?"

"Oh, I don't wish to offend you, my dear; but you must remember that all men are weak, and easily led astray by a pretty face. It is a wife's first duty to put temptation out of her husband's way. Now,

does Miles belong to the same clubs as he did before he married?"

"I suppose so."

"Not the Barbarian?"

"Certainly; why not?"

"Ah, you ought to make him give up that at once. My husband belonged to four clubs when he married me, and now he has given them all up except the Academy, and he does not go there often. He is much better, as I tell him, at home with me and the children. When a lot of men get together they talk nothing but wickedness, and encourage each other in vice. If you'll take my advice you won't allow your husband to see too much of his bachelor friends; they only lead a married man into mischief, and make him discontented with domestic life."

"I should never dream of interfering with Miles's friends," answered Cecily haughtily. "And if he ever tires of his home and me I shall not raise a finger to prevent him from seeking amusement elsewhere. I would never condescend to keep my husband with me against his will."

"What nonsense," said her sister-in-law with a fat laugh. "Do you really fancy that your husband will always be your lover? Well, well, I suppose most

young wives have their little illusions, but they soon wear off."

When Mrs. Bingley and her sticky-fingered child had taken their departure, Cecily sat still for a moment clenching her hands and repeating to herself:

"She is Miles's half-sister! She is Miles's half-sister!"

If it had not been for that relationship she thought that she must have ordered the dangerously good-looking Jane never to admit Mrs. Bingley again. When she had recovered her composure somewhat, she went into the study where her husband was at work, and stood silently behind the chair, with her chin resting on the top of his head. Miles, who was becoming accustomed to such little attentions, and who looked upon them as no interruption to his work, went on with his writing until he came to the end of a paragraph. Then he laid down his pen, and stole his arm round his wife.

"Do you want anything, dear?" he asked.

"Nothing particular," answered Cecily, her late sufferings making themselves apparent in her tones.

"What a mournful little voice," exclaimed Miles. "Come in front, and let me look at you. Why, you

are quite pale, darling, and there are tears in your eyes. What can be the matter?"

"I only wanted to ask you something," returned his wife, swallowing a sob. "Miles, do you think you belong to enough clubs?"

"Why, yes, I belong to three. I had thought of giving up the Barbarian; I hardly ever go there."

"Oh, don't do that," exclaimed Cecily. "Or if you do, couldn't you belong to another, one you would go to oftener?"

"You seem very anxious to get rid of me," he said, a little inclined to feel hurt. "Have I inflicted too much of my society upon you?"

"No, you know you couldn't do that. I only wanted you to feel as free and independent as you did before you married. And Miles, haven't you any bachelor friends you would like to ask to dinner? I could dine in the breakfast-room if you would rather have them alone."

"Thank you," he returned, "but I much prefer your company at dinner to that of any bachelor acquaintance. When I feel a craving for exclusively masculine society I will let you know."

"Yes, be sure you do," said his wife.

There was silence between them for a few moments, which Cecily broke with the inquiry :

“ Miles, do you ever feel bilious?”

“ Certainly not,” replied her husband, repudiating the insulting suggestion with excusable warmth. “ I never felt better in my life. Do you want to know anything else?”

“ No—yes. Don’t you think Jane a very pretty girl?”

“ Jane!” said Miles with a puzzled look, for he was not yet accustomed to the apparent irrelevance of the feminine mind. “ Oh, you mean the parlour-maid. I haven’t observed her very closely, but she seems a nice, fresh-looking girl.”

“ Oh, but she is really quite handsome. She has such a straight nose, and such long eyelashes. Do look at her when she is waiting at dinner to-night.”

“ Certainly, if you wish it,” he answered, absently. “ Now, suppose you fetch your work, and come and sit by me, while I read you what I have written this morning. I think it goes rather well.”

CHAPTER XI.

IN spite of the annoyances inflicted by the Mrs. Bingleys of society, and the inevitable small worries of every-day life, Cecily was almost as completely happy during the first few weeks in her new home as she had been upon her wedding journey. Perhaps the knowledge that a chance revelation of some of the follies of her past might lower her for ever in her husband's eyes, might even destroy his love for her, made her hug her happiness all the closer, treasuring it as we seldom treasure what we actually have, exulting over each day and hour that her precious possession was left to her.

The only check inflicted upon her perfect contentment with her lot was in connection with her desire to develop her artistic talent, and turn it to the best account.

"Miles," she said one morning, when the furniture had all been re-arranged, and the wheels of the house-keeping machinery had begun to run smoothly, "would

you have any objection to my attending some art-classes?"

"Art-classes!" said her husband, raising his eyebrows. "What on earth do you want to do that for?"

"Because I should like some more lessons in design, and later on I want to learn etching."

"But what for?" he repeated.

"Why, so as to make the most of my one small talent. Mr. Fleming always said that with more teaching and practice I ought to do good work some day."

"Work!" exclaimed Miles, his face clouding. "You don't suppose I am going to allow my wife to work, do you? I can make money enough for both of us, and I don't ask my darling to do anything but attend to the house-keeping, and enjoy herself in her own way."

"But with servants like ours the house-keeping doesn't take half an hour," pleaded Cecily, "and drawing is the occupation I enjoy most of all, only I don't care about doing it in an amateurish way. I know there is no actual need for me to earn money, but if one's work has a market value, that is at least a proof that it is worth doing, that there is some demand for it in the world."

Miles reflected for a moment. He was sincerely

anxious that his wife should have everything her heart desired, and yet he had a horror of the publicity of professional work for a woman, believing it to be unsexing, if not actually demoralising. After a moment's thought, however, his face cleared, for he fancied that he had hit upon a solution of the problem.

"Have as many lessons as you please, dearest," he said. "Only you must take them privately. I don't admire the type of woman who attends public classes. And as regards work, I have a volume of short stories coming out next season, and I propose that you should illustrate them with some of your charming designs. I will pay you with a brooch or a bangle, and your name need not appear, so that you will be saved all unpleasant publicity."

"Of course I shall be delighted to illustrate your stories," said Cecily, though she did not quite see how this arrangement met the question of market value. "And I want no payment beyond your approval."

"And afterwards," went on Miles, warming with his theme, "you can design initial letters and tail-pieces for my books, and perhaps programmes for my plays. Besides, you can always make drawings for presents to your friends, and to sell at bazaars."

“Yes, so I can,” she returned, trying not to look disappointed, for it was hard to give up her own little private ambition altogether. She had the genuine creative impulse which burns in the soul of its possessor as money burns in the pocket of a spendthrift, and her whole nature craved for a fuller, freer development. However, she quickly forgot her disappointment in the interest of planning illustrations for Miles’s stories, which of course demanded her best thought and most finished execution. If the designs only helped the book to sell, and quickened the reader’s appreciation of its contents, it would matter little, she decided, that the artist remained anonymous.

As Miles was now working steadily at his new book, and was consequently shut up in his study during a great part of the day, Cecily felt the necessity of finding congenial occupation for her leisure hours. She could not draw all day, but her talent found an outlet in the needle as well as the pencil, and she took a keen pleasure in knitting silken socks in elaborate patterns for her husband’s wear, and in embroidering his handkerchiefs with the most ornamental and inextricable of “M’s” and “D’s.” Then again, she decided to begin a course of reading calculated to im-

prove her mind and render her a more satisfactory companion for an intellectual man. Hitherto, she had read little but novels, poetry, and a few modern biographies, but her recent travels had stimulated her intelligence, and imbued her with a desire to learn something more of the world in which she found herself, and more especially of the record of her own kind.

With this end in view, she made a raid upon her husband's library, and carried off "The Descent of Man," which she believed, from what she had heard, would be a good book to begin upon. She intended to keep the plan a secret from her husband, in the hope of surprising him some day with the result of her newly-acquired knowledge. She had read little more than half the book, however, when Miles, coming into the drawing-room unexpectedly one morning, caught her with the volume in her hand.

"Why, what dingy-looking tome have you got there?" he inquired. "I believe you have been plundering my book-shelves."

"Yes, I have," replied Cecily, with conscious pride. "I wanted to read 'The Descent of Man,' so I stole it one day when you were out."

"What can have put the 'Descent of Man' into your head?" asked Miles, his brow contracting.

“You have your subscription at Mudie’s, and I see you have got *Temple Bar* and Mrs. Oliphant’s latest novel.”

“Yes, but one gets tired of novels and magazines, and I felt as if I wanted something more solid. Besides, I thought it would be such a good thing if I could improve my mind a little so as to be more of a companion to you.”

“But I don’t want you to improve your mind; I am quite satisfied with you as you are. And I would rather you did not read books of that kind.”

“Why, is there any harm in it?” asked Cecily. “I was getting quite interested in it, and I am delighted to find that I can understand it nearly all. There are only a few scientific terms I wanted to ask you the meaning of.”

“I don’t approve of science as a study for women,” he said decidedly. “It unsettles their minds, and makes them tiresome and pedantic. You see your dear little brains are not strong enough to take a comprehensive view of any wide subject.”

“Oh,” said Cecily, looking rather depressed at the thought of the mental inferiority of her sex. “Do you know, Miles, I sometimes wonder why God made women.”

“To carry on the race and make their husbands happy,” he returned, with the air of one who solves a very easy problem.

“Then unmarried women are of no use at all.”

“Well, not much, except to criticise the bringing up of other people’s children, and pauperise the poor.”

“But there are so many of them,” she said, as her thoughts turned to the spinsters of her own class, many of them active-minded intelligent women, with a longing to turn their lives to some account, yet condemned by reason of a defective education and the prejudices of their male relations to a weary round of afternoon calls and tea-parties, relieved only by district visiting. “It seems a pity that they should not be given an opportunity of doing something really useful, and taught how to do it properly.”

“I don’t see what they could do that would not take the bread out of men’s mouths and be more or less unsexing. They are barren fruit-trees—mere cumberers of the ground.”

“But,” said Cecily gently, “even barren fruit-trees, if they are properly tended and allowed room to grow and put forth leaves, may give a pleasant shade and help to sweeten the air around them. It is only when

they are cramped or neglected that they become stunted withered things, mere cumberers of the ground."

"You look quite mournful over the fate of the poor fruit-trees," he said, smiling. "Come, give me your Darwin, and I will bring you up a volume of Tennyson or Mrs. Browning. Poetry will be a change from novels and magazines."

Cecily relinquished her book without any further protest. She had not got far enough in her scientific studies to feel any poignant regret at being obliged to give them up.

It soon became clear that the Dormers were not to be left much longer to the uninterrupted enjoyment of each other's society. In literary and artistic circles "everybody" is in town in November when a season begins, which is pleasanter and more sociable, if less brilliant, than the orthodox one which extends from May to July. The house in Camden Gardens was soon besieged by callers, who followed up the attack by invitations to dinners, dances, and "At Homes."

The first entertainment of any importance to which the newly-married couple were invited was a ball given by a Maecenas of the theatrical world, in celebration of the five-hundredth performance of the play which was running at his theatre.

“I suppose we must go,” said Miles with a sigh when he saw the gorgeous invitation card. “It is as well for the poor playwright to keep on good terms with Belger. I dare say it will amuse you to see *Bohemia in excelsis* for once in a way, Cecily. You must put on all your finery, my pretty one, for the theatrical beauties will be there in all their war-paint.”

On the night in question, Cecily arrayed herself with anxious care, for she was determined that Miles should be proud of her, and that his friends should think that she did credit to his taste. When she had donned her white satin gown and the pearl ornaments that had been her husband’s gift, and arranged her hair in the most becoming fashion, she could not help smiling with pleasure at her own image in the glass. Never had she felt less personal vanity, nor more gratitude for the meed of beauty that had been vouchsafed to her.

“I know Miles doesn’t love me for my looks alone,” she said to herself. “But all the same, I am glad for his sake as well as my own that I haven’t got a pug nose and a squint.”

With this thought in her mind she went down to the drawing-room, where her husband was awaiting her,

and placed herself full in the light of a big standard lamp.

“Well, do you like me?” she asked, glancing shyly up at him. “Shall I do?”

Miles stared silently at her for a moment, almost dazed by the brilliancy of the apparition. He had never seen his wife in a ball-dress before, and he felt a thrill of mingled admiration and uneasiness at the sight of this superb young creature, with the swan-like neck, the dazzling arms and shoulders, the satin, lace, and pearls. He realised that they had come to the end of their happy solitude *à deux*, the final break-up of their Eden life, in which there had been but one man and one woman. When Cecily had once been seen, society would certainly assert its claim upon her; she would be admired, flattered, and made much of, while he—he who had the best right to her—would look on from the background with wistful eyes, and be thought ridiculous if he claimed a word or a glance from her. Other men, younger and more attractive than he, would listen to the voice, bask in the smiles, and enjoy the favours that once had been reserved for himself alone. To do him justice, he was not jealous of his wife’s prospective social success, nor doubtful of her constancy, but he was troubled at the thought of losing her from his side even

for a few hours, sharing her interest and sympathy with others, and seeing her happy and at home in a world in which he always felt himself an alien and a stranger.

Something of his feeling must have shown itself in his face, for the light died out of Cecily's eyes, and she asked anxiously :

“Is anything wrong? Don't you like me?”

“I think you are the loveliest creature I ever saw,” he answered slowly. “There won't be another woman there to-night fit to hold a candle to you.”

“Not in your opinion, perhaps,” said Cecily, smiling. “Their husbands and lovers may think differently. But if you are really pleased with me, why do you look so sad?”

“I was only thinking something rather foolish. I won't tell it you for fear it should spoil your evening's pleasure.”

“But you must!” she cried peremptorily. “You never think foolish thoughts, and how could I enjoy myself when you were looking sorrowful? Tell me,” she repeated, leaning over his chair, and bringing her head down on a level with his. “Tell me, dear.”

“I was only thinking,” said Miles reluctantly, as though the words were drawn from him against his

will, "that I shall scarcely be able to exchange a word with you to-night. And perhaps I was regretting just a little the long delightful evenings when I had you all to myself, when we read, and talked, and worked together, and forgot that anyone else existed in the whole world. But I am afraid that was a surly and selfish rather than a foolish thought."

"Is that all that was troubling you?" exclaimed Cecily, her face lighting up again. "Fancy your not having the courage to tell me at once. Do you suppose I wouldn't rather spend the evening alone with you than go to a million balls? I was only glad to think I looked nice because I wanted to do you credit. But why should we go to parties or strangers' houses when we are so happy alone together at home? We will not go, Miles."

"Yes, yes, we must," he put in hastily. "I cannot keep you to myself for ever, darling—you who are so young and pretty and full of life. Don't attend to what I said; I did not really mean it. I want you to be happy and enjoy yourself."

His protestations were cut short by the entrance of the parlour-maid, and the announcement that the carriage was at the door.

"Send it away," said her mistress impetuously.

“We are not going out to-night. And, Jane, you can go to bed as soon as you like; we sha’n’t want anything more.”

As soon as the astonished maid had retired, Cecily turned to her husband again.

“I’ll just go up and exchange my finery for a tea-gown,” she said. “And then we will have one of our own delightful evenings.”

“No, no,” cried Miles. “I want to have you as you are, pearls and satin, and beauty and all. I want to feel that you are mine—all mine, and that no other man has any share in you, even with his eyes.”

He opened his arms, and Cecily dropped into them like a great white bird settling down into its nest. Laces were crushed, satins creased, and curls ruffled by his embrace; but she gave no thought to her crumpled plumes, since perfect love is strong enough to cast out even feminine vanity.

CHAPTER XII.

A FEW days after the night of the ball, which the Dormers had enjoyed by their own fireside, Cecily received a note of invitation which gave her unusual pleasure, and helped to lighten the burden of apprehension which, though often forgotten or ignored, was never long absent from her mind.

“Dear Cecily,” it ran. “You know I can’t call on you so will you waive your bridal dignity, and come and see me? I did not answer your letter announcing your engagement because I thought you had behaved badly both to Jasper and to me in giving us no hint of it beforehand. You know you did encourage Jasper in a very reprehensible manner, considering that you had no serious intentions. However, as I miss your visits, and am curious to hear how you like being married, I am willing to forgive you so far as to receive you amiably whenever you choose to call.

“Yours sincerely

“DULCIBELLA FLEMING.”

Cecily was so much relieved by the tone of this note, which was quite cordial for Dulcibella, that she determined to call in Wisteria Road the same afternoon. It seemed clear that Jasper as well as his sister must have forgiven her, or Dulcie would never have sent her an invitation to renew their intimacy, and therefore she concluded that she had nothing to fear on account of any wound she might unwittingly have caused him.

On her arrival at the Flemings' house Cecily was shown into Dulcie's little sitting-room, where the invalid was lying on her sofa, a pile of new books and magazines on the table by her side.

"Come here," she said, as Cecily entered the room. "Come and stand in front of me, and let me have a good look at you. Ah," she continued, as her visitor obediently placed herself in the required position, "you are even better-looking than you were, or perhaps it is only that you are better dressed. Well, and how does being married agree with you?"

"Very nicely, thank you," replied Cecily demurely.

"You must bring your Mr. What's-his-name to see me next time you come," went on Miss Fleming. "I shall be curious to see what sort of blank you have drawn in the marriage lottery, but I suppose you think

him a prize at present. Of course, he'll dislike me, but that's of no consequence. I daresay I shall return the compliment."

"You may dislike him," said Cecily, "but I am sure that he will like you, because he knows that you have been very kind to me."

"Then I conclude that he will like Jasper even better, because Jasper was a great deal kinder to you than I was."

Cecily flushed under the taunt, but made no reply.

"There, I won't tease you any more," said Dulcie. "I only wanted to make you feel a little uncomfortable, because you look so insolently well and so arrogantly happy. What fools people are who talk about the laws of compensation. Here am I, old, ugly, helpless, and without the consolation of having had joy and love in my youth. And here are you, young, healthy, beautiful, and married to the man of your heart. Even if you lose your happiness in the future, you can never be brought down to my level. You will have had it."

"Yes, I shall have had it," replied Cecily solemnly, as though she had a prophetic vision of days in which the "remembering of happier things" would be her only comfort as well as her crown of sorrows.

“Well, I didn’t mean to make you gloomy,” said Dulcie. “I can always manufacture my own gloom on the premises. Tell me things to make me laugh.”

Thus bidden, Cecily did her best to enliven the invalid with an account of her adventures abroad, and her experiences since her return. Half an hour passed in this way before she summoned up courage to ask :

“How is your brother? Quite well, I hope.”

“Oh, Jasper is all right,” returned Dulcie carelessly. “He seems to have got over you wonderfully well, thanks to not seeing you; it is always a case of ‘out of sight, out of mind’ with him. Besides you are not the sort of woman a man can be angry with long, however badly you may behave to him. Jasper is so far convalescent that I thought it would be safe for him to see you again, as long as you will promise not to encourage him. Shall I send and tell him you are here, or will you go and surprise him in the studio?”

“Oh, no, I would rather you sent for him,” replied Cecily nervously.

A few minutes later Jasper made his appearance. He was evidently ill at ease, and to hide his embarrassment had wrapped himself in one of his most sombre

and melancholy moods. Cecily found it hard to realise that barely six months before, this Byronic-looking creature, with the air of impenetrable gloom, had chased her round the studio, and kissed her behind the easel. So much had happened since that day that she could scarcely consider herself responsible for her past flightiness, feeling rather as if her youthful escapades had been committed by some other girl masquerading under the name of Cecily Tregarthen.

Meanwhile, Mr. Fleming sat at the foot of the invalid's couch, and returned pessimistic commonplaces to his visitor's questions about himself and his work. Art in England, if he was to be believed, was not only dead and buried, but beyond all hope of resurrection. His most important Academy picture was turning out a miserable failure, but then it was impossible to hire satisfactory models, or even to buy colours fit to work with. Added to which, he had a strong suspicion, almost amounting to a certainty, that his eyesight was giving way.

Cecily listened and sympathised until her host had talked out all his bitterness and discontent, when he suddenly cheered up, and insisted upon her coming into the studio to see her picture in its finished state. Cecily followed him in some trepidation, but when he had

placed the picture upon an easel, and turned on the electric light, she forgot her misgivings in unfeigned admiration and delight.

“Oh, how lovely it is,” she exclaimed. “But surely you have idealised it almost out of knowledge.”

“No, it is impossible for art to idealise Nature,” he replied, “though it may misrepresent her in a flattering manner. I simply managed to catch you in your best looks, and wearing your most charming expression. It is only very occasionally that you look as beautiful as that, once in two or three months, perhaps, and only for half an hour at a time. The portrait certainly flatters you as you are now, but the capacity to look like that is always there.”

“I must try and practice that expression before the glass,” said Cecily, delighted to find that he had forgiven her sufficiently to resume his old habit of plain speaking. “How is it that the picture was never exhibited?”

“I decided neither to exhibit it nor to sell it,” replied Jasper shortly. He did not think it necessary to inform her that her husband had written to say he wished to buy the picture, and had begged, as a personal favour to himself, that it might not be exhibited, since he disliked the idea of his future wife’s features

being exposed to public view at Burlington House. To that letter Fleming had replied that he did not intend to sell the picture, but that in deference to Mr. Dormer's wishes, he would refrain from exhibiting it.

"How are you getting on with your drawing?" asked Jasper presently. "I hope you don't think, like many women, that marriage is a profession in itself, and one that cannot be carried on in conjunction with any other."

"Oh, no," said Cecily, looking a little embarrassed. "I haven't given up my drawing. I am designing a set of illustrations for a volume of short stories of—of Mr. Dormer's."

The artist turned from her with an impatient gesture, and busied himself in putting the picture away. Then Cecily declared that it was time for her to go, and held out her hand in farewell. As Jasper held it for a moment between his own, he asked, with a sudden change of look and tone:

"Are you happy, Cecily?"

"Yes, of course," she answered, with a nervous little laugh. "Good-bye."

By the indifference of her manner, the lack of enthusiasm in her voice, and her formal mention of her husband as "Mr. Dormer," she had quite unconsciously

produced a false impression on her former lover. Jasper possessed a dangerously vivid imagination, and in spite of his superficial pessimism, was incurably sanguine at heart. On the slender foundation of Mrs. Dormer's words and tone, and the fact that her husband was not socially popular, he built up an elaborate superstructure of fancy. A very little reflection sufficed to convince him that Cecily could never have loved that "sulky fellow," but that she had been persuaded into the marriage by her family. It seemed probable that she would soon be heartily tired of her dull husband; it was not impossible that he might come to treat her with unkindness and neglect. Already in imagination he saw the young wife alone and unhappy, her heart crying out for affection and sympathy. More dimly he could perceive a man at her side, offering such consolations as respectful admiration and disinterested friendship might afford. He did not pursue the dream further, but concluded his meditations with the decision that since his sister was unable to fulfil her social duties, it was necessary that he, Jasper, should sacrifice his feelings on the altar of politeness, and return Mrs. Dormer's call.

Mr. Fleming would have been much hurt if he could have known that Mrs. Dormer's thoughts, as she

drove home, were occupied with his sister to the total exclusion of himself. Cecily could not shake off the sense of depression which Dulcibella's remarks about the law of compensation had roused in her. Her great happiness made her nervous, and not for the first time, she asked herself uneasily, why she, who had done nothing to deserve it, should be so blessed, while other women who were far better than herself, dragged out dreary, loveless lives? She remembered that it was not always the unmarried who were the most lonely, and her thoughts turned in mingled pity and apprehension to the unenviable lot of many of the married women in her circle of acquaintance, more especially the younger ones, since youth compassates nothing in the elderly but their age. It was a continual puzzle to her how Rosamund Marchmont could endure the misery and degradation of her life, and yet turn a brave and cheerful face to the world.

Cecily received some explanation of this marvel a day or two later, in the course of an afternoon's drive with her friend. After an interesting interview with a well-known tailor, the pair were driving down Piccadilly on their way to the Park when, in passing the entrance to the Burlington Arcade, they saw Mr. Marchmont come out, accompanied by a golden-haired

lady, with a complexion that was wonderfully and fearfully made. He followed his companion into a hansom, and, a block occurring at the moment, was detained for a few seconds face to face with his wife. Cecily felt herself blushing hotly in sympathy with her friend, but Mrs. Marchmont sat looking straight in front of her with an expression of the calmest indifference. Presently she turned and met Cecily's eyes.

"Don't look so miserable," she said with a slight smile. "What am I that I should hope to compete with such a rival? I haven't got black eyelids, a pink chin, or butter-coloured hair."

Cecily gazed at her in astonishment. "How can you bear it?" she broke out passionately. "How can you take it so lightly? I should kill either myself or him."

"Yes, I can remember the time when I used to talk in that sort of way," said Mrs. Marchmont. "But one outgrows heroics."

"But why do you put up with it?" asked Cecily, seeing that all reserve between them was at an end. "Why do you remain with him?"

"Because I was brought up to keep my word. I took my husband for better for worse, and I promised to cleave to him only as long as we both should live. I

would willingly leave him if he desired it, but he never has desired it. When he is ill, or when one of his loves has been unkind, he is very glad to turn to me for consolation and sympathy. The worst of it is that he still falls in love with me periodically, and thinks me very hard-hearted because I refuse to listen to his protestations."

"But he has not kept his share of the contract."

"No, but as long as a man only perjures himself to a woman and lies about a horse his honour remains intact. On the other hand, if a woman deceives her husband, she is an abandoned reprobate; that is part of the gospel according to man. You see I have learnt my lesson quite perfectly. I know how to control my face as well as my feelings; I have my heart in perfect order, and my emotions under military discipline."

"Oh, don't talk like that—I hate to hear it," exclaimed Cecily passionately. "When a woman is young and pretty and has a natural craving for love and happiness, how can she crush down her heart and set a seal upon her emotions?"

"Only by cultivating her mind," replied Mrs. Marchmont, "and even that resource would be withheld from her if most men could have their way. She may read, of course, as long as she keeps the repre-

hensible practice to herself, but that is like living entirely on tinned and potted foods. She seldom meets another woman with whom she can exchange ideas, or discuss the questions that interest her, while the men of her acquaintance brand her as 'new' or 'advanced' if she ventures into deeper water than a dissertation on the last new play or picture-show. It is a curious thing that people are always filled with pity and indignation when they hear of a woman's body being starved, but they have no sympathy for one who suffers the far worse starvation of heart and mind. However, I ought not to grumble, for I actually have one man friend who talks to me as if I were a rational being, who doesn't think that if one is born a woman one ought to die a house-keeper."

"Mr. Spenser?" put in Cecily.

"Yes, for the past two years we have been trying that experiment which the world can never be brought to believe in—a friendship between a man and a woman."

"I'm afraid yours is rather a one-sided friendship," said Cecily, smiling. "At least, Mr. Spenser does not look at you in a very friendly way."

"A one-sided friendship is more likely to last than a two-sided one. The woman can generally keep her

heart when she knows that the man has lost his; that is, if there are good reasons that she should do so. That sounds rather cruel, but I don't believe it does a man any harm to fall in love with a woman whom he knows he can neither marry nor lead astray. It teaches him self-control and respect for the other sex, while he enjoys a happy love-affair all the more when it comes, as it surely will. A man is always ready to exchange the substance of friendship for the shadow of love."

"And a woman?" asked Cecily softly.

"As a rule she grows passionate when the man turns platonic, but as she has been brought up to suppress her feelings, she shows nothing of the change that has taken place within her, and no harm is done."

"No harm in unrequited love!" exclaimed Cecily. "Oh, how I wish that you and every other woman could be as happy as I am."

"Poor child, you think you have found the philosopher's stone," said Mrs. Marchmont, "when all you have got is a little bit of tinsel, which I and most other women have held in our hands at some time or other. When we find that it is nothing but common tinsel, some of us throw it away, and continue our search for the stone that shall transmute all our sur-

roundings into gold, while some of us keep our bit of tinsel, and make the best of it. You will have to make your choice some day."

Cecily made no reply, but reflected that her friend's unfortunate experience had rendered her unduly cynical and pessimistic. The love of ordinary men perhaps, was no better than tinsel, but surely the love of a man like Miles might be compared to the magic stone that was able to transform even the basest clay into precious metal.

CHAPTER XIII.

WITH a pathetic desire to conciliate Fate by diffusing some of her own unmerited happiness, Cecily began, in the first weeks of her new life, to look around her for some of those step-children of nature or society who are in chronic need of help and sympathy. In this benevolent purpose she received every encouragement from her husband, for Miles, mindful of his own early struggles, had been accustomed, since the dawn of more prosperous days, to give aid both in time and money to some of the youngsters of his acquaintance who were still going through the literary or artistic mill, and getting ground rather small in the process. Cecily was delighted to share in such a kindly work. She invited hungry journalists and dramatic authors to meet editors and managers at dinners calculated to soften the hearts of the latter, listened with inexhaustible patience to the outpourings of minor poets, took anæmic girl-students for country drives, and induced

her husband to lend small sums to poverty-stricken artists, who only needed the means of procuring colours and models in order to produce Academy pictures.

As the winter wore on, the Dormers' circle of acquaintance was daily enlarged, and invitations poured in upon them with embarrassing abundance. It would have been impossible to refuse even a tithe of the dinners, dances, theatre-parties, and "At Homes," without offending well-meaning friends, old or new; besides, when the plunge was once taken, Cecily felt no desire to renounce society altogether in favour of her own fireside. It was undeniably pleasant to be sought after and made much of, to find herself surrounded, wherever she went, by friendly faces and admiring eyes. Moreover, the hours wherein she was forced to ignore her husband's presence and bestow all her attention on strangers, were more than compensated for by the enhanced delight they felt in each other's company when they were alone together once more.

And strange to say, Miles, who had hitherto only regarded society as a fine field of observation for the novelist or the playwright, began to catch the infection of Cecily's enjoyment, though his was of a more vicarious kind. He felt a genuine pride in his wife's beauty

and charm; he liked to see her admired and petted, and, rather to his own surprise, he had been, so far, entirely free from jealousy. But then Cecily had always walked so circumspectly, and was, moreover, so utterly and undisguisedly devoted to himself, that it would have taken a more unreasonable man than Miles to doubt her constancy.

But it is impossible for a woman to be beautiful and popular without making enemies, either among the admirers she has been compelled to snub, or among the women from whom she has unconsciously filched them. As time went on there were whispers that Mrs. Dormer was not as good as she looked, and that hers was a case of "still waters run deep"; while many eyes and ears were open to detect the young wife in some piece of imprudence or worse, which should justify the rumours that were afloat concerning her.

Among the keenest of the watching eyes and listening ears were those of Mrs. Bingley, who bore a grudge against her sister-in-law on several counts. In the first place, Cecily had refused to profit by Maria's advice about house-keeping matters, an injury which was aggravated by the fact that she kept her servants and gave excellent dinners. Secondly, Mrs. Dormer had

treated her nephews and nieces with most culpable neglect, not even giving a children's party for them at Christmas, which, Mrs. Bingley considered, was her bounden duty as the aunt of such interesting cherubs. Worst of all, Cecily was a social success, which Mrs. Bingley most distinctly was not. The elder lady was accustomed to thank Heaven that she was no gad-about, a compulsory virtue, since she eagerly accepted every invitation that she received. It was a bitter annoyance to her that Mrs. Dormer was invited to many desirable houses, the doors of which had never been open to Mrs. Bingley. Maria was one of those persons, not rarely to be met with, who have a chronic quarrel with society because, although they contribute nothing towards its pleasure or amusement, it does not instantly recognise and appreciate their intrinsic merits.

For some time Mrs. Bingley found no better method of venting her ill-humour against her sister-in-law than by deploring to all her friends the levity and worldliness of her poor brother's young wife, and by remarking to Cecily herself that Miles was looking thin and yellow, and suggesting that he was probably kept up too late at night, or in need of a plainer, more wholesome diet. But eyes sharpened by malice usually

contrive, sooner or later, to see all that they desire to see.

“I find that I shall be obliged to go down to Devonshire to-morrow on business,” said Miles one morning at breakfast. “It is a great nuisance, because I shall not be able to get back until the afternoon of the following day.”

“But you will take me with you,” said Cecily, surprised at his speaking as though he intended to leave her behind. “What part of Devonshire are you going to?”

“Ilfracombe,” he replied, looking a little embarrassed. “You see it is a long way to go for so short a time, and the country will be looking dreary at this season of the year, so I thought it would be better for you to remain comfortably at home.”

“Oh, but I should enjoy the change,” she said, feeling hurt at the ease with which he was arranging to leave her for at least a day and a half. “I have always wished to see Devonshire, because it is your native county. Perhaps we should have time to visit your old home.”

“No, I must get back next day,” he said. “And I am afraid you would find it very dull, dearest. I should

have to leave you alone while I attended to this business. If you wish to see Devonshire I will take you there when the warm weather comes, and we will do the regular round."

"But it isn't Devonshire I really care about," pleaded Cecily, her eyes filling with tears. "I only wanted to be with you. But perhaps you would rather go alone; perhaps it would be more of a holiday for you."

A big lump rose in her throat and checked further speech, while the tears that had gathered in her eyes welled over, and began to trickle slowly down her cheeks. It was the first time that Miles had seen her cry since their wedding-day, when she had wept over the parting with Madge and Peter, and the sight filled him with consternation and self-reproach.

"Don't cry, my darling," he cried, upsetting his egg-cup, and hurrying round to Cecily's end of the table, his handkerchief in one hand, and a piece of toast in the other. "You make me feel such a monster of cruelty. Of course I want to have you with me now and always; it was on your account that I thought of going alone. You shall do whatever you like, my dearest child, if only you will stop crying, and tell me that you forgive me."

“You gave me such a fright,” said Cecily, as her husband kissed away the tears from her eyes. “I thought you were beginning to get tired of me. And I should have been so dreadfully anxious and miserable if you had gone away without me. I should have lain awake all night thinking about robbers and railway accidents and hotel fires.”

“And you are really willing to face all these dangers for my sake?” returned Miles with a laugh which sounded just a little forced.

The next morning the pair set off together on their long journey, Cecily in high spirits at the prospect of their holiday, and feeling as if she was about to enjoy a second honeymoon. Miles was more silent than usual, and if his wife had been in the mood to criticise him, she might have noticed that his manner was slightly uneasy and constrained. They reached Ilfracombe in time for a late lunch, and afterwards Miles explained that he would have to go out at once to see about his business, which would probably detain him until near dinner-time.

“What would you like to do with yourself?” he asked. “Will you walk about, or would you rather have a carriage for a couple of hours?”

“I think I had better drive, as I don't know my

way about," said Cecily. "Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No, I shall be glad to stretch my legs after the long journey," he replied. "Besides, I am going to an uninteresting part of the town."

The afternoon was fine for the time of the year, and Cecily enjoyed her leisurely drive about the town and the neighbourhood. After she had given the order to return to the hotel, the carriage passed along a road which seemed to be wholly given up to lodging-houses. Cecily was glancing languidly at the dingy little buildings with the highly ornamental names when her eyes suddenly lit up with interest, for she fancied that she discerned a familiar figure some way ahead. Surely that was Miles's coat and Miles's walk. She was still trying to make up her mind as to his identity when he turned in at the garden-gate of a small detached house, and rang the bell. He was standing with his back to the road as the carriage passed, but it was Miles himself beyond a doubt. Glancing over her shoulder Cecily saw that he was admitted into the house, which bore the name of Combe Cottage, and was more attractive in appearance than most of its neighbours, having clean curtains and flowers in the windows.

Miles did not get back to the hotel till just in time

to dress for dinner. He looked pale and tired, but made an effort to talk and appear like himself, inquiring about Cecily's drive and the various places she had seen. When she had answered all his questions, she asked with a mischievous smile:

"And you? Did you enjoy yourself at Combe Cottage?"

To her astonishment her husband started as if he had been shot, and turned upon her a look of mingled fury and suspicion.

"You—you followed me?" he stammered in husky tones.

"No, of course not," answered Cecily, in hurt surprise. "How can you think of such a thing? I happened to be driving that way, and I saw you at the door of Combe Cottage. You surely don't suspect me of spying upon you?"

"No, no, I beg your pardon," he said hastily. "I am tired and stupid to-night, and I could not understand how you had got the name so pat. The fact is," he continued, recovering his self-possession, "my business was really on other people's account, and I felt bound to respect their confidence."

"I see," said Cecily, only too glad to be reassured. "I suppose it is nothing in which I could help?"

“No, dear; it is only a case of a little advice and assistance to two maiden ladies whose father had a farm close to my old home. They used to be very kind to me when I was a boy, and now that they have come down in the world I am glad to have the opportunity of helping them. They keep a lodging-house, and they managed to get into difficulties with their landlord, but I have been able to put the business straight for them. I did not suggest taking you to see them, because they are very sensitive, and would not like anyone to know that they have received assistance from me.”

“Poor old dears! I am glad they have found a friend in you,” said Cecily. “How good you are, Miles.”

“Nonsense, it is no question of goodness,” he replied brusquely. “Any other man in my position would have done the same.”

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE of the most regular attendants at Mrs. Dormer's Sunday afternoon "At Homes" was her whilom instructor, Jasper Fleming. Cecily could not accuse herself of having encouraged his visits; indeed, mindful of Dulcibella's warning, she had never invited him to the house, though Miles had occasionally proposed his name when an "unattached man" was required for a dinner-party. But in spite of the fact that she was not responsible for his frequent appearance in her drawing-room, and that she invariably introduced him to the prettiest women present, in the hope that he might embark upon another and more fortunate love-affair, she could not help feeling a little nervous and a little guilty each time that his name was announced. Yet Jasper invariably behaved with the most absolute propriety, never singling out his hostess by his attentions, but devoting himself rather to the society of her husband, whose liking he had won by offering to paint for him a replica of the

picture, "Shakespeare's Rose." Miles was accustomed to say that Fleming was a pleasant, sensible fellow, and worth a dozen of the empty-headed puppies who played about his wife's drawing-room.

Most conspicuous among the young men thus contemptuously designated was Leonard Bassett, who had returned from a six months' residence in Italy, decidedly improved both in voice and manners. Cecily had been by no means delighted to see him when he first made his appearance at her house, by reason of certain incidents in her former relations with him which she would gladly have forgotten. But his deferential manner, his evident anxiety to please, and most of all his charming tenor voice, overcame her misgivings and induced her to extend to him the sort of elder-sisterly patronage that she had formerly bestowed upon Peter. Leonard was always ready to make himself useful in little ways, to run errands, procure concert-tickets, take the dog for an airing, and sing at her musical parties, while in return for these services he seemed to expect no reward beyond an occasional *tête-à-tête*, with his hostess, in which he confided to her his troubles and his aspirations, his successes and his disappointments. From the height of her newly-acquired dignity Cecily soon came to regard him as "a nice boy," over whose

music and morals it seemed possible that she might exercise a beneficent influence.

It was natural, perhaps, that Mr. Bassett should regard himself and his relations with Mrs. Dormer in rather a different light. He was an astute young man with a keen eye to his own interest, and he knew that the Dormers, or rather the people that he met at their house, were likely to be useful to him from a professional point of view. He was aware also that he would become an object of envy and admiration to all his men friends if he were believed to be *au mieux* with the beautiful Mrs. Dormer. He had not the faintest intention of committing any serious indiscretion, or of indulging in the luxury of a grand passion; but the consciousness that he had mildly compromised the lady, or caused her husband just a little uneasiness, would have been deliciously flattering to his self-esteem.

The world was not long in discovering that the good-looking young tenor was constantly at Mrs. Dormer's house, that he generally managed to attend the same parties as herself, and that he never sang with so much expression as when his eyes were fixed upon her face. Women who had been unable to tempt Mr. Bassett into a flirtation with themselves, or to persuade

him to sing at their houses, began to exchange smiles and meaning glances whenever his name was coupled with Cecily's; while older women, with whom coquetry had given place to an ambition for the reputation of a popular hostess, made a point of inviting Leonard to the same entertainments as Mrs. Dormer, and always arranged that they should sit next each other at dinner.

It is probable that gossip would never reach the ears of the persons gossiped about if it were not for the good offices of near relations or old family friends, who really enjoy plain-speaking, and seldom shrink from making unpleasant revelations. Thus Miles remained in blissful ignorance of the fact that Cecily was being "talked about" until the scandal came to Mrs. Bingley's ears. That lady promptly decided that it was her painful duty to inform her poor deluded brother of the reputation that his wife had already gained for herself in society.

Calling in Camden Gardens at a time when she knew Cecily would be out, she ordered the servant to show her into Mr. Dormer's study. Miles looked up from his work as she entered with an air of gloomy resignation. Much as he respected his sister's housewifely capabilities, he did not enjoy the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with her.

"I am sorry to disturb you," began Maria, sitting down and getting up again two or three times, after the manner of women who carry useful articles in pockets situated at the back of their gowns, "but I wanted to speak to you privately, so I came this morning because I heard Cecily say that she was going to her dressmaker's."

"You wanted to speak to me about Cecily?" asked Miles.

"Yes, it is about Cecily," replied Mrs. Bingley; "but nothing very pleasant, I am sorry to say. I thought it my duty to tell you that people are talking very disagreeably about your wife and that good-looking young Bassett. You know he is constantly at this house, and they are always meeting elsewhere. In fact people say they seem quite inseparable."

"Oh, people say!" echoed Miles angrily. "I wonder you take the trouble to repeat such idle nonsense, Maria. Cecily finds the boy useful at her parties, and it isn't her fault if he happens to be invited to the same houses as herself. But I suppose that is quite enough to make all the envious old women talk!"

"That's all very well," returned Maria, with offended dignity, "but the world doesn't usually talk

without good reason. It never talked about me, for example, or accused me of flirting. However, as long as you are satisfied it is not for me to interfere. All the same, I should advise you to keep an eye on that young man, and you will soon see whether or not I was justified in repeating what you call idle nonsense."

"That would involve watching my wife," said Miles coldly, "which I certainly should not condescend to do."

"Well, of course you must please yourself. I can only tell you that everybody is remarking that you are an extremely easy-going husband. And many people are surprised, too, that you should allow your wife to be so intimate with a woman of Mrs. Marchmont's stamp."

"What is the matter with Mrs. Marchmont?" asked Miles irritably.

"Didn't you know that she holds dreadfully advanced views? I have heard that she thinks women ought to have the same education as men, and that they should all be brought up to some profession. I dare say she thinks they ought to be allowed to vote too."

"I never knew that she had any nonsense of that

sort in her head," said Miles, not unwilling to make a scapegoat of Mrs. Marchmont. "She has always seemed to me a womanly woman."

"Ah, that's all put on," returned Mrs. Bingley, shaking her head. "But it is not only her opinions that are unsound; it's her conduct. You know that Mr. Spenser?"

"Spenser? Yes, what of him?"

"He and Mrs. Marchmont are very intimate indeed. They go to theatres and concerts together, and discuss books that most women would not like to confess that they had read. Of course they pretend that they are only friends, but we all know what friendship means between a man and a woman. I don't consider her at all a desirable companion for a young wife."

"I can't say I am anxious that Cecily should be inoculated with the views that you attribute to Mrs. Marchmont," said Miles. "I will speak to her about the matter. And, Maria, I don't think you need make yourself uncomfortable about the world's opinion of Cecily. People are always ready to slander a pretty woman; but I have absolute confidence in my wife."

"I'm glad to hear it, I'm sure. I hope you may never find out that the world was right," replied Mrs.

Bingley mournfully, as if she felt it to be more than doubtful that her aspiration would be fulfilled.

When his visitor had left him Miles tried to go on with his work, but the thread of his thought was broken, and do what he would he could not get the vision of a handsome youthful face out of his mind, while the sound of a passionate tenor voice rang persistently in his ears. Like most men, he set a quite disproportionate value upon youth and good looks, or rather he exaggerated the extent of their influence upon the feminine mind. Although he had pretended to turn a deaf ear to Maria's reports of the gossip that was afloat concerning Cecily, he had too rooted a belief in his sister's judgment and perspicuity not to feel troubled and uneasy at the recollection of her significant words and looks.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" he inquired, as he and his wife sat at luncheon together.

"Rosamund and I are going to tea at the Chromatic Club," replied Cecily. "Leonard is giving a party, and he wants me to play hostess for him."

"Who is Leonard?" asked Miles snappishly.

"Why, Leonard Bassett of course. Everybody calls him Leonard."

“That is no reason why you should,” retorted her husband. “I suppose you mean the puppy with the eyeglass who is always getting under one’s feet at your parties.”

“Has he bothered you?” asked Cecily. “I’ll give him a hint not to come so often.”

“That won’t be much use considering that we meet him wherever we go,” grumbled Miles. “And he seems to impose upon your patience and good-nature in a very unjustifiable manner. I wonder you don’t get tired of his eternal flow of empty chatter.”

“I do very often, but then I just tell him to hold his tongue. He is a harmless, well-meaning little boy, and invaluable at afternoon teas, but perhaps he has given us an over-dose of his society of late.”

She spoke so naturally that Miles felt that his, or rather the world’s suspicions were manifestly absurd. He thought it better to change the subject, and seek another outlet for the discomfort which was oppressing him.

“I have lately heard reports about your friend Mrs. Marchmont that surprised me very much,” he remarked after a pause.

“About Rosamund,” said Cecily, inwardly wondering what could be the matter with Miles. Had he

stuck fast in his book, or could he have eaten something that had disagreed with him?

“Yes, I am told that she is quite an emancipated woman, that she holds very advanced views.”

“Rosamund is not a shrieking sister, if that is what you mean,” returned Cecily. “She says that the principal opinion she holds upon the woman question is one that she shares with Plato, Sir Thomas More, and Stuart Mill, namely that women should have the same training and the same opportunity for work as men. That can’t be such a very new or foolish opinion if it was held by three wise dead men.”

“Plato, More and Mill were all cranks on some subject or other,” said Miles shortly.

“It is odd though that they should all be cranks upon the same subject.”

“Pray don’t get into the habit of arguing,” he said irritably. “It’s a most disagreeable trick in a woman. I had no idea that you had taken up any ideas of this sort, and I hope you will drop them again as soon as possible. To return to Mrs. Marchmont; I hear that apart from her objectionable views she has been making herself very conspicuous with Spenser.”

“They are great friends,” said Cecily; “and I have no doubt that his companionship is a comfort to her in

her unhappy life. But she is perfectly straight; I would vouch for her honour with my own."

"I don't believe in platronics," returned Miles contemptuously. "Altogether Mrs. Marchmont seems to be a most unsuitable friend for you, and I wish you to withdraw gradually from your intimacy with her. There need be no open rupture."

"Give up Rosamund!" exclaimed his wife aghast. "Oh, but I couldn't do that."

"Not when I desire it?"

"I don't want to do anything against your wishes," said Cecily; "but I am sure that you are mistaken about Rosamund Marchmont. She is a good woman, and it is an honour to be her friend."

"That is a point upon which we differ," said Miles coldly. "And I must ask you to be guided by my judgment, which is, at least, more experienced than your own. We need not discuss the question further. You know my wishes, and that ought to be enough for you."

Cecily hesitated. It was the first time that she had come into serious conflict with her husband's will, since in no previous discussion between them had any question of principle been involved, and she was always ready to give up her personal wishes to his. But a true

friendship was too precious a thing to be thrown lightly away, and besides, she had an instinctive feeling that to one in Mrs. Marchmont's position the confidence and affection of another woman might be a help in time of need.

"I have no doubt you think you are acting for the best," she said at length; "but that is because you do not know all the circumstances of the case. I could not be happy in an intimacy that you disapproved of, and yet I could not drop an old friend without giving her any reason. I will explain to Rosamund that you have been misinformed about her, and that consequently you have desired me to see less of her for the present. But I shall tell her that I shall always remain unchanged to her in heart, and that I hope some day you will find out that you were mistaken, and then we can be friends openly as before."

"You may tell her what you please so long as you do as I wish," said Miles gruffly. "But I should have thought it would have been less embarrassing to have gradually dropped her without any scenes or explanations."

"It would be more embarrassing to me to be thought a faithless friend," returned Cecily with unconscious sarcasm.

CHAPTER XV.

CECILY felt but little in the mood for her tea-party after the just recorded conversation with her husband, and the entertainment, in spite of the united efforts of Mr. Bassett and his friends to make it go off well, struck her as a dismal failure.

“What is the matter with you?” asked Mrs. Marchmont, as they drove home together. “You look as if you had a burden on your mind, and would be the better for sharing it.”

“Yes, I am rather bothered just now,” replied Cecily, feeling that she had better plunge at once into her disagreeable task. “Some wretched mischief-maker has been to Miles and filled his mind with nonsense about you; told him that you held unsound views upon the woman question, and that you—well, that you saw too much of Mr. Spenser.”

“And of course he believed it all,” said Rosamund.

“Men always believe the worst of women. Does he want to put a stop to our friendship?”

“He wants us to be less intimate. Of course it is nothing but a stupid misunderstanding, and he will probably come round in time, but till then——”

“Till then we are only to have a bowing acquaintance, I suppose. Or perhaps we may be allowed to exchange remarks about the weather; it would be difficult to hold unsound views on the weather question, wouldn't it? Well, I'm glad you had the courage to tell me, Cecily. I should not have liked to be a bone of contention between you and your husband, and it would have hurt me very much if you had cooled off without giving any reason.”

“Yes, I thought you would feel like that,” said Cecily. “That is the best of having to do with a large-minded woman. And we can still be friends at heart, can't we? You won't think me faithless or ungrateful?”

“No, I know you too well for that,” replied the elder woman. “You mustn't allow the matter to cause you any distress. As long as your husband is good to you and makes you happy, that is all that really signifies. The gain or the loss of a friend is but a trifle in comparison.”

“Miles is the best husband in the whole world,” observed Cecily with conviction. “But I do wish he hadn’t a sister Maria. I believe that she is at the bottom of all the mischief. What is it about Maria that makes men like Miles believe so implicitly in her practical judgment and good sense. She seems to me a hopeless failure in every walk of life, even as a *Hausfrau*. She spoils her children, is always changing her servants, and never gives her husband anything fit to eat.”

“That is easily explained. Mrs. Bingley has the one thing needful in masculine eyes—stupidity. When a woman is entirely lacking in mind and imagination the void is supposed—by men—to be filled up with all the housewifely and maternal virtues. I believe the fallacy is partly the outcome of the masculine inability to distinguish between dulness and ignorance, or between learning and intelligence. Men never seem to realise that a stupid woman may acquire the knowledge of a sixth-form boy, while a clever woman may be unable to write a letter without a dictionary beside her. They can’t understand that an intelligent woman, whether she knows much or little, has the faculty of doing things well and adapting herself to circumstances, while a brainless woman is incapable of doing

anything well, from the bringing up of her children to the keeping down of her bills, even though she thinks and talks of nothing else."

"Like Maria," said Cecily with a sigh. "I wish Miles could be persuaded to see Maria in her true light."

"I am afraid he is not likely to do that. He probably once knew a clever woman who did not choose to give her mind to the details of domestic management, and with that power of generalising which, as George Eliot says, gives man so great a superiority in mistake over the dumb animals, he decided that all clever women were bad house-wives."

"But he married me, and I am not really stupid," put in Cecily naïvely.

"No, but you are so pretty and well-dressed that no man would ever suspect you of possessing anything so objectionable as brains. When Mr. Dormer fell in love with you he probably thought you far less intelligent than you really are, and the fact that you have turned out such a successful little house-keeper must thoroughly have confirmed him in his low opinion of your intellectual powers."

"I think you are exaggerating a little. Men are not all so prejudiced and narrow-minded."

“No, not all, but the vast majority are. I speak of the things that I know, and testify to that which I have read in novels and heard at theatres. You have been to the plays that profess to deal with the woman question, and you must have noticed that the sentiments which call forth the most frantic applause from the masculine part of the audience are to the effect that a woman should be a woman and nothing more, or a wife and mother and very little else. In short, the ideal woman of the ‘old man’ appears to be a female animal of the human species with an instinct instead of a mind, and passions in place of principles. Her sympathies and interests are strictly limited to her own home, and even there she proves a failure. She is jealous of her husband’s work, incapable of entering into his pursuits, and has not sufficient sense to manage her household, nor sufficient intellect to influence her children. A combination of the doll-wife and cow-mother is the most popular heroine of masculine fiction and drama.”

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Although Miles had protested to his sister that he was not jealous, and had assured her that he should not condescend to watch his wife, he found it impossible, now that the seed of doubt had once been sown in his

mind, to adhere to his resolution. Involuntarily, his eyes and ears were ever on the alert for meaning words or tender looks that might be exchanged between Cecily and Leonard Bassett. Little marks of attention, passing asides, trifling compliments, which formerly he would have regarded as the small change of social intercourse, now seemed magnified into gross impertinence on the part of the young man, or shameless coquetry on the part of his wife. Moreover, he became uncomfortably conscious of the regularity with which they met the tenor at their friends' houses, and the curious coincidence that always placed him next Cecily at the dinner-table.

It was true that Leonard came less often to Camden Gardens than formerly, for Cecily, mindful of her husband's apparent irritation against the youth, had frankly told him that he wasted too much of his time at her tea-parties, and ordered him not to come to the house more than once a fortnight. Leonard, far from being offended by this candour, was highly flattered by a command which he believed to be inspired by marital jealousy, for it would never have occurred to him that his attentions could be unwelcome to any woman. The pleasure that he took in Mrs. Dormer's society was immensely enhanced by the piquant consciousness

that there was just a *souppçon* of danger in their present relations. He allowed himself to look at her with obtrusive sympathy, broke off in the midst of harmless speeches when he saw that her husband was within hearing, and spoke of her to his men friends, as "that poor little Mrs. Dormer."

Cecily, for her part, found it impossible to take the boy seriously, but contented herself with snubbing his pretty speeches, laughing at his sentiment, and anxiously inquiring if he didn't feel well when he gazed at her with (as he imagined) his whole soul in his eyes. Unfortunately, Leonard's mental skin was far too thickly padded with vanity to allow of his being easily discouraged, and Miles, seeing lover-like glances, and hearing broken snatches of low-toned conversation, began to feel a terrible conviction that Maria's warning had been but one more proof of her natural astuteness.

Matters came to a crisis one evening at a party at the house of a famous Academician.

A series of *tableaux vivants* had been arranged, illustrative of scenes from Browning's poems, and in these Cecily had been asked to take part. The most successful of all the pictures was a representation of the poem, "A Toccata of Galuppi's." In the character of the Venetian beauty with "cheeks so round and lips

so red," Mrs. Dormer, attired in many-hued brocade and seated in a high-backed carved chair, appeared to be dividing her attention between the brave music of the old maestro and the soft nothings that her knight, Leonard Bassett, was whispering in her ear. At an old clavichord, his long fingers resting on the keys, sat a picturesque white-haired figure, whose profile was recognised by the audience as that of a celebrated pianist-composer.

This tableau roused so much enthusiasm that the curtain had to be raised and lowered half a dozen times before the actors could be released.

Miles, standing in the background of the darkened room, occupied with his own gloomy thoughts, was startled to hear his wife's name lightly uttered by a smooth-faced, flat-headed boy, who stood a little in front of him.

"Pretty woman Mrs. Dormer," observed the youth to his neighbour in tones of condescending approval.

"Yes," said the other, a prematurely bald young man, with an upper lip that curled back when he spoke, and revealed a row of yellow teeth. "I should think her husband finds her a handful though."

"Ah," said the first speaker, "she has been going the pace with that ass Bassett."

“ Yes, that’s an old affair ; it dates from before her marriage. I remember seeing her lunching alone with Bassett at a restaurant in the Strand when she was Miss Tregarthen. They were at the Gaiety together afterwards. Apparently she still has a *penchant* for her old flame. But what can you expect? A woman with a mouth like that would never be content with the kisses of one man.”

Miles moved hastily out of earshot lest he should be unable to control the impulse to strike the speaker to the ground, a proceeding which would only give publicity to the scandal that was already busy with his wife’s name. His heart seemed turned to ice, though his brain was on fire as he made his way slowly through the crowded room to the spot where Cecily, still in her Venetian dress, was standing in the middle of a little group of admirers. Leonard Bassett was not among them, for, thrown a little off his balance by success combined with champagne, he had forgotten his usual discretion, and had offended Mrs. Dormer by expressions of too open admiration. She had told him that he was an ill-behaved boy, and ordered him not to speak to her again until she gave him permission. Leonard was so much upset at this rebuke that he had to go and have some more champagne, after which he

felt that he should never know a happy moment until he had made his peace with Mrs. Dormer. But how was this to be done when she had forbidden him to speak to her? Like a flash of inspiration came the idea that he might write to her, and that a tiny pencilled note might be slipped into her hand when he bade her good-night. She could not refuse to give him her hand, especially as other people would be present, and he would obey the letter of her command by remaining absolutely dumb.

Tearing a leaf out of his note-book he hastily scribbled a petition that Mrs. Dormer would take pity on her slave, and by walking in the Park between twelve and one next morning, give him an opportunity of expressing his penitence for having unintentionally offended her. Scarcely had he finished than he saw Cecily and her husband moving towards the door. Leonard followed them into the entrance-hall, and taking Mrs. Dormer's cloak from the hands of a servant, silently placed it on its owner's shoulders. Cecily dared not show any resentment against the offending youth for fear of exciting her husband's suspicions, nor could she withhold her hand at parting. A glow of anger rose to her cheek, however, as she felt a piece of paper pressed against her palm. Surrounded as they

were, it was impossible for her to drop the note, but as her hand closed upon it, she turned a glance of mingled scorn and indignation upon her tactless admirer. Her hope that her husband had not observed the little episode was quickly dispelled, for no sooner were they seated in the brougham than Miles grasped her wrist, and said in a tone that she had never heard from him before :

“ Give me that note.”

Cecily instantly unclosed her hand and delivered up the paper.

“ I don't know what is in it,” she said, trying to keep a quaver out of her voice. “ Some nonsense from that impertinent boy, I suppose.”

There was no reply, and the pair drove home in a silence which Cecily felt to be far worse than angry speech. On entering the house, Miles went to the study, followed by his wife, unfolded and read the note, and then threw it into the fire.

“ Won't you tell me what it was about?” asked Cecily, to whom the silence was becoming intolerable.

“ It contained a request from Mr. Bassett that you would meet him at a certain time, in a certain place, for a certain purpose,” replied Miles, with crushing

courtesy. "A request that I have put it out of your power to grant."

"Oh, Miles, how can you speak to me and look at me like that?" exclaimed Cecily. "As if I should have been likely to grant it! Though I am certain he meant no harm, and he would never have had the impudence to write me that note if he had been quite—quite himself to-night."

"He is fortunate in having you for his champion," returned her husband, with an exasperating bow.

"Oh, what can I say?" cried poor Cecily in despair. "Indeed, I have given him no encouragement beyond what you know of. Till to-night no word has ever passed between us that I should have been ashamed for you and all the world to hear."

"Possibly," retorted Miles. "Some people are deficient in a sense of shame."

Cecily looked at him helplessly. It seemed to her as if her husband had suddenly been transformed into a cynical, sneering stranger, who suspected her of some unknown crime, and judged her without listening to her defence. Naturally she knew nothing of the various causes that had contributed to feed the flame of

Miles's wrath, and to heighten his distrust of her relations, past and present, with Leonard Bassett.

"It is difficult," went on Miles, in the same cold, judicial tones, "to reconcile your assertion that you have never encouraged Mr. Bassett, with the fact that he has dared to address you in terms which no man, not even a society tenor, would venture to use to a woman from whom he had received no encouragement. Possibly, however, he may have been emboldened by reminiscences of his former acquaintance with you—of the days of Strand luncheons and Gaiety burlesques, for example."

A sudden light broke in upon Cecily's bewildered mind.

"Oh, I meant that I had never encouraged him since I was married?" she said, with an air of relief. "I know I did flirt with him a long time ago, when I was a girl. But I only once lunched and went to the Gaiety with him, and that was quite an accident."

"I never knew until to-night that my wife was a professed flirt."

"I never flirted after I knew that you loved me, Miles, and I am sorry I did before; but most of the girls I knew did the same, and I had no one to tell me

that there was any harm in it. Miles," she continued, after waiting for him to speak, "you know the whole truth now. Won't you forgive me, and love me as you did before? I always told you that I wasn't good enough for you, only you wouldn't believe it. But if you will forgive me for the past I will try to be all that you could desire in the future."

"I forgive you," said Miles slowly; "but I am afraid it will be long before I can forget the occurrences of this evening. I must confess to feeling much grieved and disappointed."

"I always knew that you would be disappointed in me when you found me out. Please make up your mind, once and for all, that I am a very unsatisfactory person, but that with your help I may be more worthy of your trust and affection some day."

She went closer to him, and held up her face to his. Miles was on the point of yielding altogether when his eye fell on the soft full curves of the lips that were so temptingly near his own. The stranger's words, "A woman with a mouth like that will never be satisfied with the kisses of one man," came back to his mind, and he jerked away his head with a little gesture of repulsion. His ungracious action worked an instantaneous transformation in his wife. Her chin

went up, and a look of scorn flashed into her face as she said :

“You say you forgive me, but you don't seem to know what forgiveness means.”

Then without another word, she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE next morning Miles was careful to avoid all reference to the painful scene that had taken place the night before. He had forgiven his wife with his lips though not with his heart, and it was his nature to brood over an injury in silence, to allow a wound to rankle and fester, rather than to let the poison escape in openly-expressed reproaches, while it would have been impossible for him to put the matter out of his mind altogether. With true masculine modesty, he had always determined that when it pleased him to marry his wife should be a wingless angel, pure in thought as in deed, ignorant as she was innocent of evil. Cecily had attracted him by her gentle, modest demeanour far more strongly than by her beauty, and when he won her he had congratulated himself upon having secured a pearl of great price. But now his domestic treasure turned out to be, apart from her sweetness and charm, very much like other people's treasures, a mere every-

day young woman who had romped and flirted, and said and done foolish things without any prophetic consciousness of the high honour that fate held in store for her. It was true that even now, in face of the disillusionment that he had just undergone, he did not really doubt Cecily's devotion to himself, but he wondered gloomily how long a man could depend upon the constancy of an avowed coquette.

His jealousy was now thoroughly alight, and he watched his wife's behaviour to every man she met with eyes that magnified the sweetness of each smile, exaggerated the meaning of each look, and suspected surreptitious notes in every hand-clasp. Although he never openly accused her of encouraging the attentions of the men with whom she came in contact, his irritation and uneasiness showed themselves either in fits of sulky taciturnity, or else in contemptuous sarcasms and cutting remarks which never failed to leave their sting in Cecily's heart. Social intercourse to her, no less than to him, began to assume the form of a daily martyrdom, and dinner-parties and dances seemed the most exquisite form of torture that human ingenuity could devise. She bore her husband's ironical speeches and reproachful silence meekly, and seldom attempted any self-defence, for she honestly believed that he was

justified in his displeasure, and thought it only natural that so admirable a man should be bitterly disappointed when he discovered what a faulty imperfect creature he had taken to wife. Yet just at that period his harshness was very hard to bear, for Cecily, who all her life had enjoyed robust health and the buoyant spirits that are its natural complement, was suffering from strange feelings of weakness and depression, which, combined with the heart-ache caused by her husband's behaviour, compelled her to realise for the first time that life was not necessarily a pleasant pilgrimage through a summer land, where love and happiness sprang up like wild flowers about the traveller's path. Never before had she been so keenly in need of tenderness and affection, and never before had she felt so lonely and forlorn. With Madge in India, her friendship with Mrs. Marchmont forbidden, and her husband estranged, whom had she to turn to? It was true that there were times when Miles forgot his jealousy and suspicions, when for a day or an hour he would be his old self again, kind and loving as ever; but even then things were no longer quite the same, for he and she had wandered out of Eden, and the curse fell heaviest on the woman's head.

The change that had taken place in Mrs. Dormer's

looks and spirits, her subdued demeanour and anxious eyes, did not escape the notice of her friends. At a musical "At Home" two or three weeks after the night of the *tableaux vivants*, Mrs. Marchmont came up to her, remarking, as she perceived Cecily's look of alarm :

"Don't be frightened. I have just asked your husband if I may talk to you, and he has given his august permission."

"I am very glad," said Cecily. "It seems a long time since I have seen anything of you."

"And you don't look as if you had been getting on very well without me," observed Mrs. Marchmont. "Is anything wrong? You are not a bit like yourself to-night."

"I have rather a headache," returned Cecily. "But I think I ought to ask what is wrong with you. I noticed that you were out of spirits directly you came into the room."

"Oh, something is always more or less wrong with me. And that reminds me, do you know that one of your husband's objections to our friendship has been removed?"

"No, which is it? Have you been getting up a society for the promotion of feminine ignorance?"

“No, but I have lost what he would consider an undesirable friend.”

“Mr. Spenser,” said Cecily with a glance of sympathy. “I am so sorry. How came that about?”

“People have been telling him for years that he ought to marry because he has an old family estate, and in this country the heir is provided for the property, not the property for the heir. He has lately been introduced to a pretty, well-brought-up and properly inane young lady of nineteen, who is supposed to be willing to marry him if he asks her.”

“And he?” inquired Cecily.

“He is beginning to find friendship a little unsatisfying, and is decidedly flattered at the notion of being loved by a rosy-cheeked girl of half his age. He consulted me upon the matter, and I advised him to marry the girl, because I saw that his own mind was practically made up. Of course he said that he hoped our friendship would continue just the same, and equally of course I determined that it should come to an end at once. He won't miss me at first; he will be quite happy with his young wife for a few months, or possibly a year. Afterwards, when the novelty of married life has worn off, and he no longer knows whether his companion is pretty or plain, he will suddenly dis-

cover that there is nothing in her. Then he will begin to suffer, for he is even more dependent than most men upon a woman's sympathy and understanding."

"Then he will want to come back to you."

"Very likely; but I hope I shall never do anything to cause another woman unhappiness. The poor little wife will have plenty to put up with in any case, for her husband will want something of her that she cannot give him. Yet he will have no one to blame but himself. A man knows perfectly well that pink cheeks, bright eyes, and round arms are not lasting charms, and if he marries a girl for her physical attractions only, he has no right to complain when her freshness fades, as if he were a child whose wax doll had melted by the fire. A marriage of that sort could only be successful if it were a septennial arrangement, like our parliament, with the possibility of a dissolution at any moment."

"But you?" put in Cecily, remembering her friend's words, "When the man becomes platonic the woman grows passionate." "You will miss him dreadfully."

"Yes, there will be rather a blank in my life just at first. I shall forget that I am a reasoning being

when I haven't him to talk to. But I have a large subscription at Mudie's, and a slum in Whitechapel, and I am learning to play the zither, and—oh, in these days a woman has no time to break her heart. Besides, we are going abroad very soon. My husband's health is supposed to require the air of Monte Carlo."

"Oh, I am sorry you are going away," said Cecily regretfully. "Even if I may not see very much of you, it is a comfort to know that you are within reach, and to be able to exchange a word with you now and then."

Mrs. Marchmont was not the only person who noticed the difference in Mrs. Dormer's spirits. Jasper Fleming was still a regular visitor at the house in Camden Gardens, and though he had never been received with more than common friendliness by Cecily, he had not quite renounced the hope that some day he might have the opportunity of doing her a service, even if it were nothing more than a proffer of sympathy or consolation in an any trouble that might come upon her. He was not a villain by nature, and he had no definite intention in his mind, no deliberate plot against the virtue of the woman he loved. But his feeling for her had been strengthened and deepened by

the knowledge that she was forbidden fruit, and his visits to Camden Gardens were now the chief events of his existence, the keenest pleasure and excitement that remained to him. When it became evident that Cecily was not so happy as formerly, when her eyes began to look wistful and her mouth had taken a pathetic droop, he assured himself that it was his duty to watch over her in order that he might be able to render her the help and protection of a true friend should she ever be in need of one. As for his reward, that was a secondary matter. If he served his lady with the faithfulness and devotion of a minnesinger of old, he felt that he might safely leave the recompense to her tender heart and generous nature.

His opportunity came sooner than he expected. The electricity of the Dormers' domestic atmosphere culminated one day in a storm of unusual magnitude. Miles, while searching for a reference among the volumes of poetry in Cecily's room, chanced to take up a gaily-bound book entitled "The Passions of an Hour," by John William Stubbs. After a contemptuous glance at its contents, he was about to replace the volume when his eye was caught by some writing on the fly-leaf. "With fondest love from the author. May 3rd, 189-," he read, or rather the words seemed to burn

themselves upon his brain. On the 3rd of May, he and Cecily had been engaged just a fortnight, and even then she must have had a second string to her bow, a poetical Stubbs who dared to regard her with fondest love. His head turned dizzy at the thought, and his jealous heart ached with an almost intolerable pain, yet he could not summon up courage to carry his discovery to his wife, and openly accuse her of treachery. He preferred to brood over his supposed wrong, and covertly revenge himself by cold looks and sneering words.

For three miserable days he tortured his wife by his unaccountable moroseness, but on the fourth day a sarcastic allusion to the poet Stubbs gave Cecily the clue to the cause of his late displeasure.

“The poet Stubbs!” she exclaimed, her sad little face suddenly brightening. “Oh, have you been looking at her absurd little book?”

“Her?” returned Miles inquiringly.

“Yes. John William Stubbs is the pseudonym of an old school-fellow of mine, Milly Dasent. She is a wild little Irish girl in real life, but dreadfully morbid in her poetry.”

“How is it that I have never heard of her before?” he asked suspiciously.

“Because she lives in the wilds of Tipperary, and we don’t correspond regularly. We were never really great friends, but she has a way of bestowing her fondest love upon the merest acquaintances.”

This explanation sounded plausible enough, yet Miles was not appeased. He was angry with himself for having wasted so much anguish over a mere fancy, angry with his wife for having unintentionally led him into such an absurd mistake, and more angry still with the poet Stubbs for her ridiculous pseudonym. He felt sure that Cecily must have guessed the suspicion that had been troubling him—perhaps at that moment she was laughing at him in her sleeve—and goaded by the intolerable smart of humiliated egoism he cast about for some means of saving his dignity. The fact that this could only be done by sacrificing his wife’s dignity did not prevent him from snatching at the first idea that occurred to him.

“That is a very neatly contrived little story,” he remarked sardonically. “Milly Dasent, the wilds of Tipperary, a school-girl friend. I congratulate you upon the excellence of your inventive powers.”

With these words he walked out of the room. Cecily, after standing still for a few moments in bewilderment, threw herself upon the sofa and burst into a pas-

sion of tears. It was clear that Miles had lost all faith in her, and that must mean that he no longer loved her. Would she have to drag out the rest of her life bereft of love, shrinking before stony looks, cut to the quick by contemptuous tones. She could not bear it—she would far rather die. Death was no longer a dim far-away terror; it seemed to have crept closer to her of late, and now it lurked at her very elbow. She had felt so ill all that day; the light of her life was darkened, the solid earth seemed to reel beneath her feet, and an horrible dread overwhelmed her.

Cecily was still lying on the sofa in the chill dusk of the early spring afternoon, the tears of mingled exhaustion and misery slowly stealing down her cheeks, when "Mr. Fleming" was announced. A minute later the servant brought in lights, and then Jasper noticed that Mrs. Dormer's eyes were red and swollen, and that there were unmistakable traces of recent tears upon her face. Perceiving that any attempt at concealment would be useless, Cecily took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes, saying frankly:

"I was feeling moped and stupid this afternoon, so I amused myself in feminine fashion by indulging in a good cry about nothing."

"You never used to mope in the old days," said Jas-

per, sitting down beside her, and looking into her face with sympathetic eyes. "And it is not like you to cry about nothing."

"Oh, yes, it is; you don't know how foolish I am. Besides, I really have a headache, and my new dress doesn't fit."

"Ah, you can't turn it off like that," he said, with genuine feeling in his tones. "Won't you tell me what your trouble is, and let me try to help you? It might comfort you a little to talk it over with a friend. And you do look upon me as a friend, don't you, Cecily?"

The kindness of his manner touched her to the quick. Try as she would she could not choke down the sobs that threatened to suffocate her, nor could she prevent the tears from filling her eyes again, though she turned away her head in the hope that Jasper might not see them.

"You are very good," she said, trying to speak in her natural tone, "and I do look upon you as a friend. But there are times when we must all be alone, when no one can help us."

The sight of her tears, the sound of the sob in her voice, sent the blood to Jasper's head, and made him for the moment forget all motives of prudence, honour,

or self-control. Seizing Cecily's two hands in his, he exclaimed passionately :

“Not the man who loves you—not the man who would lay down his life to save you from a finger ache? Cecily, I cannot bear to see you unhappy, to stand by and do nothing to comfort you. Ah, if you would only trust yourself to me you should never have another moment's suffering; I would devote my whole life to making yours one long dream of bliss. And it would not be wrong, darling, because it is love that constitutes marriage, and not the ceremony. If a man does not make his wife happy he is not really married to her; he is not her husband in the sight of Heaven. But you and I, dearest——”

At this point his flow of eager rapid words was cut short, for Cecily wrenched her hands from his, and springing up, looked round helplessly, as though asking the unseen powers by what cruel freak it was that this undesired and terrifying declaration had been brought upon her.

“Oh, what have I done? How have I deserved this?” she cried, throwing out her arms with a gesture of despair. “Am I really wicked, or is it some horrible delusion that makes everybody think me so depraved?”

“Cecily,” said Jasper, sobered by the unexpected effect of his impulsive speech. “Don’t talk like that. Nobody thinks you wicked, I least of all. If the knowledge of my love only alarms and distresses you, forget what I have said. You shall never be troubled by me again.”

She turned and looked him straight in the face.

“I don’t wish to assume any high and mighty airs of virtue,” she said quietly. “If I had made you respect me in the past I suppose you would never have used those words to me to-day. But if it is true that love alone constitutes marriage, then I am fast married to my husband, for I love him with all my heart, and I would rather be miserable with him than happy with any other man in the whole world.”

“Then there is nothing more to be said,” returned Jasper, trying to assume a tone of easy indifference, “except to beg your forgiveness for the annoyance my stupid blunder must have caused you.”

“I think there is one thing more to be said,” replied Cecily gently. “The next time you try to comfort an unhappy woman, don’t offer her shame in exchange for tears.”

When Miles came in, his ill-humour nearly dis-

pelled by a long walk, and his conscience pricking him slightly for his behaviour in the matter of the poet Stubbs, he was surprised to find his wife prone upon the sofa with her face turned to the wall. Contrary to her usual custom, she did not spring up to welcome him, or give any sign that she had noticed his entrance.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked, advancing to her side. “Aren’t you feeling well?”

“I am feeling as if—as if I ought never to have been born,” she replied, without turning her head.

It was so unlike Cecily to be sulky or resentful that Miles was thoroughly frightened by her behaviour, and lost no time in trying to make his peace with her.

“I am afraid you have been thinking of what I said this afternoon,” he murmured apologetically. “But I didn’t really mean it; only when one is angry and suspicious one doesn’t stop to weigh one’s words. I know I have been rather a brute to you of late,” he went on, eating his humble pie with as good a grace as as he could assume, “but it’s all because I love you so, darling, that I should like to kill every man who so much as looks at you. Come, give me a kiss, and say

you forgive me, and I'll try never to be disagreeable again."

He put his hand under her head, and gently turned her face round to his. Cecily submitted passively to his caress, but for the first time she did not return it.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE stormy scene recorded in the last chapter seemed to have cleared the air, for it was followed by a lull that lasted unbroken for a week or ten days. Miles, a little penitent on account of his own behaviour, and considerably disturbed by his wife's pale face and listless manner, was honestly trying to control his unreasoning suspicions, and to make up by his tenderness in the present for the harshness of which he had been guilty in the past. Cecily, who was incapable of bearing malice, responded readily to his kindness, and rejoiced in her optimistic heart at the prospect of a renewal of the peace and happiness of their early wedded life. She made up her mind that at the first favourable opportunity she would confide a new and wonderful secret to Miles, a secret which, she knew, would cause him intense gratification, and, in all probability, render their relations more permanently stable and harmonious

Meanwhile Jasper Fleming was endeavouring, not very successfully, to forget his disappointment, and stamp out his passion for Cecily.

The knowledge that she really loved her husband, the destruction of his vague but long-cherished hope, left a blank in his life which rendered him moody, restless and miserable. He was unable to sleep, to eat with any appetite, or paint to any purpose, and his sister, who depended upon his humours for her sunshine or her gloom, felt as though another and a deeper shadow had been cast upon her joyless life. Jasper had confided nothing to her of his recent adventure, but Dulcibella had no difficulty in guessing the cause of his depression. Although she had no scruples about teasing and scolding her brother herself, she seldom allowed any one else to vex him with impunity, and she believed that Cecily had trifled with Jasper's feelings out of deliberate vanity and wantonness.

"That little coquette," she said to herself, "like all pretty women she thinks that she has a perfect right to make men miserable, that they are only paying a fair price for the privilege of gazing upon her pink cheeks and simpering lips. I hope she will be made a fool of herself some day, and then she will learn what a heartache feels like."

The invalid was left much alone just then, and during the long weary hours she lay and meditated in impotent bitterness upon the injustice of Fate, and the folly of those who believed that the children of men enjoyed any degree of equality. Why, she asked herself, over and over again, should some people have unbroken prosperity, whether they deserved it or not, while others dragged out the slow years in shadow and solitude? In the midst of her musings a strange thought grew up in her mind. Providence, when left to itself, took no trouble to ensure equality in the fortunes of men and women, but Providence might be assisted in its operations, might be given a little impetus in the right direction. As she pondered over these things, a solution of the problem suggested itself, and a resolve slowly took shape in the poor warped brain. The vision of Cecily's happy lot, brimming over, as Dulcie believed, with love and brightness, rose before her eyes, and side by side with it the vision of her own maimed and blighted life, as well as of her brother's aching heart and disappointed hopes. Something must be done to rectify matters, to give the spoiled child of fortune a taste of the suffering which she had so wantonly inflicted upon others, and Dulcie determined that

she would take upon herself the office of executioner of justice.

She was confirmed in her resolution next morning when a new doctor who had been called in to see her recommended that she should try some lately discovered German baths, which were supposed to have a wonderful effect upon nervous ailments. Jasper, in his feverish restlessness, had jumped at the idea of a thorough change, and insisted that they should start at a few days' notice for Schleppenbad. Dulcie was willing to face the fatigues of a long journey and the discomforts of a foreign hotel in the hope that change of scene might enable Jasper to forget his woes, but before she left England she intended to carry out her little project of righteous vengeance. On the evening that the date of departure was finally arranged, Jasper being at his club, she had herself wheeled into the studio, where she hunted through her brother's portfolios for his charcoal sketches of Cecily's head. Choosing two or three of the most successful, she returned to her own room, and ordering the maid to bring her a board and drawing materials, she was soon busily at work.

Three or four mornings later, while Miles was sitting at work in his study, a large flat parcel was

brought to him, addressed in printing characters. He laid it aside while he finished a sentence, then carelessly cut the string and unfolded the paper covering. His indifference turned to stony horror, however, at the sight of the contents, which consisted of a spirited chalk drawing, entitled "The Artist and his Model. Sketched from the Life."

Miles sat staring blankly at the picture for a few moments, then suddenly springing to his feet he seized the drawing, and rushed to the morning-room where he knew that he should find his wife occupied with her accounts.

"What has passed between you and Fleming?" he demanded in a voice that he scarcely recognised as his own.

Cecily turned quickly round, and catching sight of her husband's livid cheeks and burning eyes, said to herself:

"He knows everything and believes the worst."

A strange calmness came over her, the calmness of one who has lost all, and has nothing more to hope for. She felt no fear of her husband, but she knew that it would be impossible to make him understand how much or how little she had been to blame, and she did not intend to plead vainly with him for forgiveness.

“Mr. Fleming is not coming here again,” she said quietly.

“You have forbidden him the house, have you?” cried Miles with an angry laugh. “Wasn’t that rather like locking the stable door after the horse was stolen? I don’t want to know what precautions you have taken to ensure your present safety; I want to know what passed between you and Fleming before you married me. Tell the truth, if you can; I am sick of lies and subterfuges.”

“I am going to tell you the truth,” replied Cecily. “You can believe me or not as you please. I sat to Mr. Fleming as you know, and he gave me lessons in return. He was very kind and amusing, and I liked him very much, and—as we got to know each other better he—we were often very silly. We played and talked nonsense together, and, I suppose, behaved very badly, but I thought there was no harm in flirting in those days.”

“I had no idea I had married a woman of such wide experience,” observed Miles. “I should like to know how many favoured lovers you have in the background. I presume that Fleming treated you like a lover. Did he kiss you?”

“Once or twice.”

Miles gave another laugh.

“Lord! what exquisite fools men are. I flattered myself that I had won a girl as pure and truthful as the day, and she turns out to be a thorough-paced coquette, who has changed her lovers as she changed her gloves, and an accomplished liar into the bargain.”

“I have only lied to you once,” said Cecily steadily, “and that was because I loved you so that neither truth nor anything else seemed of any consequence compared with the fear of losing you.”

“Have any other men kissed you?” he demanded.

“Two or three—at dances,” she confessed, as though the circumstances were a partial justification of the offence.

“After supper, I presume,” said Miles, with a grin like that of an angry dog. “Now will you kindly proceed with the narrative of your last romance, if it is your last. You encouraged your lover to continue his attentions to you at my house.”

“I did not encourage him. I allowed him to come to the house like any other acquaintance because I believed that he had quite got over his fancy for me.”

“And afterwards you found that you were mistaken?”

“Yes; but of course that was the end of our friendship.”

“I should have thought it was rather late in the day for scruples of delicacy, considering the terms of familiarity upon which you had stood in the past,” sneered Miles.

As his wife made no reply to his taunt, he suddenly produced the drawing, and held it up before her eyes.

“I was alluding to the days when this sketch was taken,” he said.

Cecily gave a gasp of astonishment, and then, much to her own surprise, broke into a fit of nervous laughter, the result of long pent-up emotion and physical exhaustion. But Miles, regarding this behaviour as a proof that she was even more hardened than he had imagined, exclaimed indignantly:

“Woman, are you so lost to all sense of shame that you can laugh at your own infamy?”

“Infamy! Miles,” cried Cecily, with a little hysterical giggle. “You can’t really believe that I sat to Mr. Fleming in that costume. It is a cruel hoax, and I believe I know who is the author of it.”

“I hope it may be a hoax,” said Miles, “though of course I cannot any longer place reliance on your word. But the sketch, whether it were taken from the life or no, has done its part; it has enabled me to convict you out of your mouth. I knew nothing about your rela-

tions with Fleming when I came into this room, and now I know a good deal, though I dare not hope everything."

There was a pause.

"What are you going to do?" asked Cecily at length.

"I think I had better go abroad for a time, for I really cannot stand the resurrection of any more lovers just at present," he replied. "I don't accuse you of having done anything that would justify a separation in the eyes of the world, for women like you are generally careful to keep within the letter of the law. It amuses you to dance on the edge of a precipice, but it is self-interest, not virtue, that keeps you from toppling over. Personally, I have more respect for the woman who falls a victim to the warmth of her passions than for a respectable, cold-blooded coquette. I fully admit your legal claim upon me, but when love and confidence have been destroyed, it seems to me a mere farce for a married couple to remain under the same roof. You can stay here if you please, or you can go elsewhere, and in either case I will make you a suitable allowance. Some day when I have got over the shock of the discovery of your real character, it may be possible for me to contemplate a renewal of our life together."

Cecily did not answer at once. She was debating within herself whether or no she should tell Miles her secret. She had intended to confide it to him that very day, if he continued to be in a kind and affectionate mood. She had really looked forward to forgetting her personal fears in the knowledge of his pride, his happiness and his tender solicitude for herself. But now all was changed, for the news would cause him more embarrassment than pleasure. He would control his anger, no doubt, conceal his disdain, and perhaps decide to remain with her, but he would be actuated by pity, not by love. No, she felt that it would be impossible to make the revelation in that miserable moment. Later on, when they were far apart, tidings would reach him that would surely soften his heart towards his unsatisfactory wife, and bring him back to her side with pardon and tenderness in his heart. But for the present she could not endure the thought of remaining in London, in the sight of all her friends a forlorn and deserted wife.

“I would rather go away somewhere,” she said. “I suppose I must take some of your money, as you allowed me to give mine to Kate and Peter? But I can manage with very little.”

“I shall give you the allowance suitable to my

wife," he replied, seating himself at the writing-table. He wrote a cheque for a hundred pounds, and handed it to her. "I will tell my bankers to send you the same quarterly if you will let them have your address," he said. "Of course you understand that the allowance will only be continued as long as I have reason to believe that you are living in a manner of which I should approve."

If Cecily had had only herself to think of she would have refused the money thus offered, but the recollection of her secret forced her to subdue her pride, and she took the cheque without a word.

"You can tell your friends what story you please," said Miles. "I shall not contradict it. I daresay the world would consider my conduct absurdly fastidious and over-strained if it knew my true reason for leaving you. But I think differently from the world in these matters, and I am convinced that in the present state of my feeling towards you it would not be for the real good of either of us if we remained together."

"I have no doubt you are right," replied Cecily, speaking as dispassionately as if she were discussing the case of a third person. "Now that you have lost your love for and trust in me you would only be miserable if we went on living together, and you would make me

miserable too. I can quite understand your feeling, for it was my faith in your goodness that first drew me to you, and made my love for you so satisfying and complete. I forgot that our marriage might not be a fair bargain for you, that there was such a thing as a moral *mésalliance*. You seemed so ready to take me with all my faults, so willing to make allowance for all my weakness, that I—I had not the strength to throw away what looked like a chance of perfect happiness.”

Truth rang out of every word, candour shone from her unclouded eyes. Miles, as he looked and listened, felt his pride weakened, his resolution wavering, even his belief in the evidence of his own senses shaken.

“You need not hurry to go,” he said, realising that his only chance of safety lay in flight. “I shall take a room at the club for a few days and only come back to pack up.”

“No, no, I would rather go at once,” cried Cecily, across whose mind flitted visions of unaired sheets which would give Miles rheumatism, or a feather-bed which would give him nightmares. “It is only eleven o’clock; I shall be gone by three. So if you come home to dinner you will find—no one here.”

“As you please,” he said, turning to leave the room, but not trusting himself to bid his wife farewell.

“Any letters that you may send here will be forwarded to me, and when I know your address I will let you hear from time to time how I am getting on.”

“Thank you,” said Cecily. “And, Miles,” she called, before he had time to reach the door, “you will take care of yourself, won’t you? Don’t go into dangerous places, or run any unnecessary risks.”

“You needn’t be anxious about me,” returned her husband, as he finally made his escape. “No harm ever comes to people who have nothing left to live for.”

Cecily felt tempted to cry after him, “You may have more to live for than you think,” but she controlled the impulse, and a moment later she heard the hall door slam, and realised that she was that most lonely of all created beings—a deserted wife.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN Cecily understood that Miles had really gone, that there was no looking back, no relenting in his heart, she went to her room, and began to pack such of her belongings as she desired to take with her in a dull mechanical sort of way. It was not until the packing was finished, a short letter of explanation written to Kate, and a cab whistled for, that she remembered it would be necessary for her to fix upon her destination

“Where to, ma’am?” asked the parlour-maid, whose curiosity about this sudden departure had not been satisfied by her mistress’s explanation that she had been called unexpectedly into the country.

“Where to?” Cecily stared vaguely for a moment in the woman’s face, and then uttered the only words that occurred to her, “To Paddington Station.”

On the occasion of their journey to Ilfracombe, the only time that Miles and she had gone out of town

since their return from their wedding-tour, they had started from Paddington Station, and it was natural, perhaps, that in this moment of misery and bewilderment the name should suggest itself to her mind. Before the cab had proceeded far, however, she recollected that if she wished to keep her whereabouts a secret, it would be as well to cash her cheque before leaving town. Accordingly, she ordered the cabman to drive to the West End branch of her husband's bank, and, having accomplished her business, she resumed her journey to Paddington. Arrived at the station, she found her way somehow to the booking-office, but here another difficulty presented itself. To what place should she take a ticket? Ilfracombe was the only name she could recollect, and why not Ilfracombe as well as any other place? There, at least, she would find warmth, sunshine, and beautiful scenery, to say nothing of bitter-sweet memories of happier things. She took a ticket to Ilfracombe; an express, she was told, would start at three-thirty, and it was already past three.

For the next five or six hours the cast-off wife sat in the corner of a carriage, her eyes and mind alike a blank. People got in and out, but she did not notice them; one or two spoke to her, but she did not know

what she answered them. Occasionally the name of a station brought a gleam of consciousness. Here Miles had bought a book for her, there he had brought her a cup of tea, and here again they had started guiltily apart when the guard appeared at the window. When at length the train ran into Ilfracombe she sat still in her corner until a porter came to tell her that the terminus was reached. Seeing that she looked strange and ill, he managed to find her luggage with such vague description as she could give him, and put her into a cab, when, for the third time, came the puzzling question :

“Where to?”

“To Combe Cottage, Bideford Road,” replied Cecily, in whose brain the address seemed to have stuck to the exclusion of all else. She recollected the bill “Apartments to Let” in the window, and it being then only the beginning of May, she thought there was a fair chance that one room, at least, would be vacant. Nor was she disappointed. When the cab stopped at the door of the cottage a tall middle-aged woman came out, followed by a little maid, and received the weary traveller. There was no difficulty about rooms ; the cottage was empty at present, but unrecommended lodgers were expected to pay a week’s rent in advance. Cecily paid

the sum demanded, and then begged to be shown straight to her room. She was tired and poorly, she explained, and wanted nothing but a cup of tea and a good night's rest.

The first few days in her abode passed with Cecily like an uneasy dream. Afterwards she had vague memories of aimless strolls about the town, which, somehow, always led to the hotel where she and Miles had passed the night, of long hours spent in listless idleness and unrefreshing sleep, of repulsive-looking meals that appeared only to be sent away again, of an occasional snappish remark or suspicious question from her landlady, Miss Susan Redd. As the days passed on, however, thought and consciousness began to return, the bruised heart reviving like a trampled plant under the healing influences of warm sunshine and pure air. Cecily still possessed all the recuperative force of youth; she was feeling better physically than she had done for some time past, and she was insensibly cheered and soothed by the beauty of her surroundings and the charm of the May weather. She began to take herself to task, to tell herself that in her circumstances it was criminal to fret, and that there was no occasion for despair. She reminded herself that Miles, in spite of his natural indignation and disappointment, had not

cast her off for ever, and she resolved to pass her period of probation in a way that would be likely to commend itself to his mind when he should be pleased to receive her back into favour again.

She spent a great part of the long warm days out upon the cliffs, now drinking in the beauty of the scenes around her, now trying to transfer some of them to paper. Sometimes she brought out a book from the library, making pathetic endeavours to choose works that would be likely to strengthen and improve her character, and that yet were not what her husband would consider too advanced for feminine perusal. At home there was the finest and most delicate of needle-work to be done, stitching so elaborate that it required brain as well as eyes and fingers, and served to distract her thoughts from herself, her cares and anxieties. In spite of the loneliness of her lot she was not actually unhappy during those long quiet weeks. She was leading a healthy, innocent life, she had plenty of occupation in the present, and she had hope for the future. Even the ordeal that lay before her, and that once would have filled her with terror, she now looked forward to with cheerful courage, much as a good Catholic might look forward to the fires of purgatory, knowing them to be the only means of reaching the joys of

heaven. Wishing to keep her hiding-place a secret for the present, Cecily had given her name as Mrs. Miles, and had not sent her address even to her sister. If her child died she was determined to take no more of her husband's money, but to go and live with Kate, who, she felt sure, would be able to put her in the way of earning her bread. But if it lived—then she would take it to Miles, and he would freely forgive her for the sake of the innocent little creature, who would be the unconscious means of their reconciliation, and the pledge of the renewal of their love. There were moments in which she could almost see Miles's expression of incredulous delight at the gift she had brought him, almost feel his arms round her in loving pardon, mingled perhaps with just a touch of penitence. And she would use no reproach to him more bitter than Imogen's gentle "Why did you throw your wedded lady from you?" She fancied she could hear him reply, as she clung round his neck: "Hang there like fruit, my soul, till the tree die."

Gradually she fell into the habit of living almost entirely in the past or the future, for companionship in the present she had none. Miss Rhoda, the younger of the two ladies of the house, had been away since Cecily's arrival, nursing her invalid mother, and Miss

Susan's society was not an unmixed pleasure. Once or twice Cecily had asked her landlady questions about her old home, in the hope of hearing incidentally something about Miles, but she had never been gratified in this desire. Miss Redd seemed to be suffering from a chronic sense of injury, and to have a permanent quarrel with Fate; consequently, she had nothing pleasant to tell. Of course she had seen better days, but the better days themselves were a source of grievance, in that they had departed.

"Ah, I never thought I should come down to doing a menial's work in another person's house," she said one day with an indignant sniff. "It seems going against Nature to make the elder sister servant to the younger."

"But I thought you were joint-owners of the house," said Cecily. "I understood that you were my landlady."

"Oh dear me, no, I'm only the slavey," returned Miss Susan with what she believed to be cutting sarcasm. "It's Rhoda's house, and Rhoda is mistress here. I never did anything but lead a steady, hard-working life on the farm, looking after the dairy and attending to father and mother. I never made anyone miserable, nor brought misfortune on my home. So,

of course, I don't deserve to have a house and furniture, and servants under me. I couldn't expect it."

Cecily was puzzled by this speech, which was not the first of the kind she had heard from the lips of Miss Redd, but it was so obviously inspired by envy and malice that she did not choose to ask for an explanation. She felt certain that she should like Miss Rhoda, a conviction that was strengthened by the study of a photograph of the younger Miss Redd which stood on the parlour mantel-piece, and which represented a comely-looking woman, with honest eyes, and a kindly, capable expression. Cecily often found herself wishing that Rhoda would come home; it would be such a comfort to have a nice, sensible woman in the house.

Miss Susan was not without her curiosity about her lodger, who was evidently a lady and possessed of means, but who appeared to have no friends, and never received a letter.

"I suppose you'll be expecting your husband back before long, Mrs. Miles?" she remarked one evening as she was clearing away the tea things.

"I don't know—not just yet," stammered Cecily, flushing crimson under the other's look and glance. "He's gone abroad, you see, and I can't tell how long he may be detained."

“He don’t seem to write often.”

“No, I haven’t heard from him since I have been here. He is travelling in out-of-the-way parts, and I don’t expect a letter at present.”

“H’m, it’s a queer time to choose to travel in out-of-the-way parts,” observed Miss Redd, with a glance at the little garment in Cecily’s hand.

“He was obliged to go; he couldn’t help himself,” murmured Cecily. “But he will be coming back some day, and I keep my spirits up looking forward to that.”

When Cecily had been rather more than a month at Combe Cottage a gleam of interest was introduced into her uneventful life by the appearance of her husband’s novel. She could not resist committing the extravagance of sending a guinea to a press-cutting-agency for notices of the book, and these, as they arrived, were a source of unqualified delight. The critics were almost unanimous in declaring that in his latest work Miles Dormer had made a great step in advance, that he might now take his place in the front rank of the novelists of the day. Several of the reviewers expressed their surprise at the hitherto unsuspected capabilities of pathos and passion suddenly revealed by the author, as well as their admiration at his exquisite

study of feminine character as depicted in the person of his heroine. Cecily laughed and cried as she read and re-read the notices. She knew that she herself had been the inspiration of the book, and that though Miles had proved himself so woefully mistaken in his estimate of her character, yet that she, or rather his idea of her, was the model from which the much-belauded heroine had been drawn. When she saw that by his latest book, Miles's reputation as a successful novelist was held to be thoroughly established, she was able to console herself with the thought that she had brought him something better than pain and disappointment. His love for her, based on illusion though it were, had taught him secrets that he had never known before.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER the parting scene with his wife Miles had dashed out of the house, not caring whither he went nor what he did so long as he was not reminded of the unworthy woman who bore his name. After lunching at his club, the happy thought occurred to him that he would call on Miss Nora Vavasour, the actress who had played juvenile lead in his last piece, and who, at rehearsals, had made a determined effort to get up a flirtation with the author of the play, an effort which he had as resolutely discouraged. But now, if Miss Vavasour chose to renew the hitherto one-sided flirtation, she should find him ready to meet her more than half-way. As it happened, the actress was at home, taking a nap before the labours of the evening, but she was quickly wide-awake when Mr. Dormer was announced, for she was convinced that, heavy in hand as she had always found him, it was well worth her while to be on good terms with so successful a playwright. Miss Va-

vasour could still boast of an effective "stage presence," but on a bright May afternoon even pink blinds could scarcely disguise the fact that she was no longer physically adapted for juvenile lead. She was extremely vivacious and friendly, however, and Miles did his best to keep pace with her chaff, and respond to her playfulness. She struck him as unusually vulgar and stupid, and he was aware that her reputation was none of the best, but he told himself savagely that women were all alike, and that the apparently refined and innocent were just as worthless as the rowdy and world-worn. Miles had not much notion of flirting, but he astonished and rather frightened Miss Vavasour by sitting very close to her on the sofa, staring into her face with strained, feverish eyes, and paying her sardonically extravagant compliments. She contented herself, however, with rapping his fingers with a teaspoon when he tried to take her hand, and parrying warmer attentions with the sofa-cushion, and Miles, though he was not enjoying himself at all, fancied that in some inexplicable way he was taking his revenge upon Cecily.

When at length he rose to say good-bye, he felt that he was on sufficiently familiar terms with his hostess to attempt to snatch a farewell kiss. Miss Vava-

sour's golden head, when she stood up, was nearly on a level with his own, and as he bent towards her, his purpose plainly visible in his eyes, she showed no signs of alarm. But just at the critical moment, a stream of sunshine stole from behind the pink blinds and lit up the actress's face, with its canvas-like skin, red withered lips, and elderly chin. The remembrance of Cecily's soft cheeks and roseleaf lips came between him and the face so near his own, and much to Miss Vavasour's surprise he suddenly relinquished his purpose, and with a muttered farewell, hurried out of the room. After a good dinner at his club, with considerably more than his usual allowance of wine, Miles allowed himself to be carried off by a youthful-minded friend to spend the evening at a popular music-hall, where he was assured that the entertainment provided would "make his hair curl." Here he tried to find amusement in the songs, tried to take an interest in the dancing, tried to admire some of the beauties in the promenade, and failed in all three attempts, his heart and mind remaining, against his will, resolutely faithful to his wife. The performance was followed by a little supper, and then Miles realised that he would have to go home—no, not home, only back to his house, for he remembered that Cecily had told him he

would find no one there. And so it was. When he let himself in he went slowly up to her room, half-hoping, half-fearing to see a curly head on the pillow. But the room was empty, and there was no sign of its former occupant except a few scattered trifles, a cut-glass bottle of eau-de-cologne, a scrap of lace hanging out of a half-open drawer, and a pair of tiny scarlet slippers under the dressing-table. He took up one of the slippers and looked at it curiously. Here was the little half-worn thing lying safely in his hand, while the precious foot it once contained had wandered he knew not whither, banished by his own decree. When he went into his dressing-room the slipper was still in his hand, and scarce conscious of what he did, he locked it away in the drawer that contained his favourite photograph of Cecily and a curl of her hair.

The next morning Miles awoke to the consciousness that he was alone and thoroughly miserable. His righteous indignation was already beginning to fade away, and leave an aching void in its place. For the first time in ten months he breakfasted by himself, and decided that the most forlorn being in the whole world was a man pouring out his own tea. Unable to bear the sight of the empty place opposite to him, he took

up the paper and glanced over its contents. Among the smaller items of news was a paragraph which stated that Mr. Jasper Fleming, A. R. A., had left England for the Continent, and therefore would be unable to take the chair at the annual dinner of the Society of Painters in Pastel. Miles threw down the paper with an exclamation of annoyance. He had intended to go to the artist's house that very morning, and demand the meaning of the drawing that had been sent to him. He would have been glad of the opportunity of working off his wrath upon a legitimate object, but now it appeared that this satisfaction was denied to him. It was not of much consequence after all, he reflected, since Cecily's confession, and not the drawing, was the real cause of his separation from her.

He decided to prepare at once for a long-projected tour in Norway. There, amid new scenes and fresh faces, he would have nothing to remind him of the woman who had caused him so much suffering, but everything to distract his thoughts and occupy his mind. No doubt he would be able to pick up plenty of local colour, and he had some idea of laying the scene of his next book in Scandinavia. These resolutely cheerful thoughts were interrupted from time to time by a twinge at his heart, which made him catch

his breath and clench his hands to prevent himself from groaning aloud in agony.

He was disturbed in his preparations by the announcement that Mr. Bingley had called to see him. Miles, fancying that the news of his domestic misfortunes had already reached the Bingleys, and that his brother-in-law had come to remonstrate or condole with him, stiffened his neck and went down to his study with the determination to snub any such ill-judged intentions. He found Mr. Bingley sitting on the edge of the most uncomfortable chair in the room, his nose slightly red, and his eyes more watery than ever. He did not look as if he required snubbing, and Miles greeted him with contemptuous urbanity.

“I have come,” said the little man with impressive solemnity, “to consult you upon a very serious matter—a matter that affects the happiness and well-being of my five children no less than of myself.”

“I shall be very glad if I can be of any service to you,” returned Miles, wondering what could be wrong with the domestic affairs of a man who rejoiced in the possession of a household treasure like Maria.

“Miles,” said Mr. Bingley, with the pathetic dignity of one who has drunk the cup of suffering to its bitterest dregs, “I am a very miserable man.”

Miles was on the point of saying, "What, you too!" but he controlled the impulse, and answered gently:

"Tell me what is wrong with you."

"I can tell you in one word," said his brother-in-law. "Maria is what is wrong with me. Yes, I don't wonder you look surprised. I have never told you what I have suffered from her before because she is your sister, but I don't see why you should not hear the truth about her for once; I have held my tongue long enough. Maria has not only ruined my life—that is no great matter—but she is ruining the lives of my children as well, and that is more than I can stand."

"Maria!" gasped Miles, his own troubles completely driven out of his head for the moment by this astounding revelation. "But I always thought——"

"Oh, yes, you always thought that Maria was a domestic paragon because she talked of nothing but her children and servants," said the other with a touch of scorn. "It is curious how easily the cleverest man may be taken in by the stupidest woman. Maria is like those pseudo-pious people who are always talking about religion but who never practise it. Do you know that I've never had a comfortable meal in my own home since I married? Do you know that we don't keep a servant on an average more than three months? Do

you know that I have been made to quarrel with all my old friends, that I have had to scheme and intrigue like the hero of a Palais Royal farce to get a few hours to myself, that all my manhood, such as it is, has been sapped away, by living for fifteen years with a feminine fool? But all that is nothing compared with the misery of seeing her disastrous influence on my children."

"But what has she done? What are you talking about?" asked Miles, still scarcely able to believe his ears.

"That's what I am going to tell you. You know I always had domestic tastes, and that I married Maria chiefly because I thought that having no apparent intellect and no education worthy of the name, she was certain to prove an excellent wife and mother. Like you and most other men I believed that a clever woman was likely to play the devil in a home. Well, with Maria I have never had a home; she has been no companion or helpmate to me, and now she is destroying my children, body and soul. You will hardly believe it, but I discovered the other day that she had been putting Molly, who is just twelve, into corsets. She had forbidden the child to tell me, but I found the little thing crying one evening, and I coaxed her to tell me what was the matter. I give you my word, Dormer,

the infernal things were laced tight, and there was the mark of the whalebone in red lines on Molly's flesh. I spoke to Maria as quietly as I could, and explained to her the fearful mischief she might cause, in language that you would have thought a child could understand, but it was no use. She answered all my arguments with the assertion that a mother must know best how to dress her daughter, and that she could not allow Molly to grow up with a figure like a sack. That was the finishing stroke; but there are other things as bad or worse. The two nursery children are taught to be greedy, deceitful, and disobedient, and as their nurse is changed about once in two months they never have any proper discipline. Maria can only manage them by bribing them with sweets that ruin their teeth and their digestions. The elder ones have improved under Miss Jeffreys, but now Miss Jeffreys is to be dismissed because Maria thinks that I am too polite to her. Good God! Dormer, I wonder I haven't been driven out of my senses."

"I had no idea of all this," said Miles, quite overwhelmed by this sudden outburst from his quiet little brother-in-law. "Of course I knew you changed your servants pretty often, but I thought that was because Maria was too clever for them, and always found them

out while other women were hoodwinked. But if things are as you say, why don't you put your foot down, and make an end of it?"

"Because at the first hint of fault-finding Maria goes into hysterics, and if you had ever seen or heard Maria in hysterics you would not wonder at my weakness. No, I lie awake at nights and turn over plans for rescuing the children, but in the morning none of them seem feasible. I have thought of escaping to America or the Antipodes with the five poor little things, and bringing them up there under a false name. And I have thought of jumping into the Thames and leaving directions in my will for the children to be entrusted to the care of competent guardians, and their mother only allowed to visit them once a month, on pain of losing her income if she disobeys my wishes. Sometimes I have almost summoned up courage to propose to her that we shall place all the children in schools and institutions, and agree to see them only at stated intervals. But I know that it would be useless. She could never be made to understand her own incompetence through that impenetrable crust of ignorant self-conceit. And, after all, she is their mother; she suffered the pains of bearing them, they are a part of her very self. What right have I to take her own flesh and

blood from her, and yet what right have I to stand by and see their young lives ruined? It is a terrible problem, and one that is too hard for me to solve."

"Nonsense," said Miles sharply. "Assert yourself—show that you are master in your own house. If Maria goes into hysterics, throw a jug of water over her. She will like and respect you all the more. Send the elder children to school, and get a nursery governess for the younger ones."

"I will do my best to follow your advice," said the poor little gentleman, who looked all the better for having relieved his mind. "But it is so easy for another man to talk like that, especially for the husband of a woman like your Cecily. Ah, you have a jewel of a wife in her, you lucky fellow! To go to your house from mine is like going from purgatory to paradise. Everything here is so sweet and clean, and the servants always have cheerful faces; whereas at home, the banisters are sticky, there is a smell of boiled cabbage all over the house, and the maids are either sulky or in tears. Here I am welcomed by a nice woman all smiles and brightness, there by a scolding fool. Of course I know that your wife is not a blue stocking, but she seems to have intelligence enough to do well anything she gives her mind to, and it is a treat to talk to her on

any subject, whether she knows anything about it or not, because she takes such an interest in all you tell her, and understands what you mean almost before you've said it. You may congratulate yourself upon having drawn the *gros lot* in the marriage lottery."

Miles hesitated for a moment.

"I may as well tell you now," he said, curtly, "that Cecily and I have agreed to part for a time at any rate. I start for Norway to-morrow, and I cannot tell when I shall return."

"What!" shouted Mr. Bingley, springing up from his chair. "You have driven that dear woman away from you! for you needn't talk to me about 'agreeing to part.' She worshipped the ground you walked on, and would never have left you of her own free will. Good heavens, man! what could you be thinking of? Were you mad?"

"Not that I am aware of," replied Miles coldly. "Cecily had disappointed me, and she had the sense to see that it would be better for me to go away by myself for a time, until I could get over the shock of disillusionment. Of course this is quite between ourselves."

"Disappointed you!" repeated Mr. Bingley. "Well, I should like to know what you expected, or what you

thought you deserved. However, there's some small consolation for me in your trouble. If you could not find happiness in marriage with a woman like Cecily, it must be useless for any man to expect it, and I may as well make the best of Maria."

CHAPTER XX.

AT Ilfracombe the days glided quietly by. Cecily's stay at Combe Cottage had extended over nearly three months when Miss Redd appeared one morning in a gown of rusty black, and announced that poor mother was dead at last, and that the funeral was to take place on the following Friday. She hoped that Mrs. Miles would not mind being left to the care of Jane for one night. Cecily soon reassured her on that point, and after a few words of sympathy, inquired whether Miss Rhoda would return to the cottage after the funeral. In the midst of her decorous emotion, Miss Susan could not resist a sarcasm at the expense of her envied elder sister, but replied, with her habitual sniff, that the mistress of the house would return with her, and that then everybody would be put in their proper places.

Cecily felt a gleam of pleasure at the prospect of Rhoda's advent, for she looked forward to receiving help and comfort from the sweet-faced original of the

photograph. Nor was she disappointed. Rhoda, her gentle eyes swollen with weeping, her comely face worn with watching, was not too much absorbed in her own grief to take a motherly interest in her young lodger, and from the moment she entered the house, Cecily felt that in the new arrival she had found a kind and capable friend. Although Rhoda was homely of speech and could boast but little learning, there was nothing unrefined about her mind or her manners, while her unassuming simplicity and sound common sense made her society eminently soothing and agreeable.

By the end of a week Cecily and her new acquaintance were upon quite confidential terms. Rhoda had told her young lodger all about her mother's last illness, her brother's troubles with his farm, and some of her own experiences with eccentric boarders, while Cecily had been unable to refrain from confiding in Rhoda certain of her hopes and anxieties, and had even made up her mind that very soon she would indulge herself with a casual mention of Miles's name when there seemed every probability that Rhoda would enlarge upon the fascinating theme. Her sense of desolation was already lightened by her intercourse with so sensible and sympathetic a soul. Rhoda saved her all trouble about ordering her meals, gave her

practical hints about her health, and trotted in and out of the room at all hours with cups of tea, basins of broth, and little saucers of jelly. Cecily gratefully accepted these attentions for the sake of the friendly presence whose very nearness was a comfort to her, and the pleasant voice that never uttered any but cheering words. It was so sweet to be petted and cared for again after her long months of loneliness and isolation.

The only drawback to this new friendship was the fact that Miss Susan's temper seemed to have undergone a decided change for the worse. She had never made any effort herself to win her lodger's liking, yet she was obviously jealous of the regard which Cecily bestowed upon Rhoda. Her chronic discontent grew more pronounced, and she complained bitterly of having to do the whole work of the house, while her sister sat like a lady in the parlour. As there was very little work to do, and as Rhoda took more than her share of that little, these complaints received but scant attention from the offending persons.

One evening, about a fortnight after her return, when Rhoda had finished clearing away her lodger's supper things, Cecily called her back as she was leaving the room.

"Stay and talk to me a little," she said. "I am so

tired of being alone. Sit down and tell me about your home, and what you did when you were a girl. Didn't you say your father's farm was on Exmoor?"

"Just on the borders, ma'am. He had a right to pasture a certain number of ponies and cows on the moor."

"What was the name of the place?"

"The village was called Tarracombe, but our farm was in an outlying hamlet. It was a lonely place."

"Tarracombe! I know a gentleman who used to live there when he was a boy, Mr.—Mr. Dormer. Did you ever see him?"

"Yes," replied Rhoda, stooping to pick up her ball of worsted, which had rolled along the ground. "He used to come and play with my brothers when he was at home for his holidays."

"Was he—was he a nice boy?" asked Cecily, trying to keep her voice steady. "It is so difficult to realise that a clever man like Mr. Dormer was ever a boy, playing pranks and getting into mischief."

"He was a very nice young gentleman," replied Rhoda, raising a flushed face from her search for the ball. "He used to come and help gather the apples for the cider sometimes, and he was always kind to us girls."

He would shake the trees for us, and he never allowed the other boys to be rough with us."

"Ah, I can quite believe that," exclaimed Cecily with shining eyes. "Always thoughtful and considerate just as he is now, except—except when people are thoroughly undeserving. Did you ever see him after he grew up?"

"Yes. The family left Tarracombe before he went to college, but some years afterwards he came back to spend the summer at our farm. He wasn't well when he came, and it turned out that he had typhoid fever. It was a long illness, and mother and I nursed him through it."

"Oh, how lucky he was to have a good, kind woman like you to nurse him," exclaimed Cecily. "I wish"—— she broke off abruptly, for her sentence would have run, "I wish I had been there to help." "Have you seen him often since?" she continued.

"Sometimes," replied Rhoda. "He was kind to us in our troubles, and helped us to set up in this house."

Here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Susan, who was evidently in one of her worst humours.

"Are you ever coming to supper, Rhoda?" she

asked wrathfully. "Here have I been left alone all the evening while you sit gossiping here."

"You musn't scold your sister," put in Cecily pleasantly, for the mere fact that she had been talking about Miles was sufficient to put her in good spirits. "It is my fault for keeping her. We have had a little chat about a friend of hers and mine, Mr. Dormer."

Susan cast a vixenish glance at her sister, and her red face took a deeper shade.

"Friend indeed!" she snapped. "A fine friend he's been to her and the rest of us. If it hadn't been for him we might be living on our own land now, instead of demeaning ourselves by taking in lodgers."

"Susan, Susan," put in Rhoda in warning tones, "Mr. Dormer is a great friend of Mrs. Miles."

"I don't care whose friend he is," cried the angry woman, losing all control over her tongue. "I only know he brought nothing but shame and ruin upon us. I wonder you should be the one to defend him, Rhoda. I suppose you think money makes amends for everything."

Cecily looked from one to the other with blanched cheeks and dilated eyes.

“What does it all mean? What is she talking about?” she asked in trembling tones.

“Oh, Susan, what have you done?” said Rhoda sadly. “What good can it do you or anyone else to rake up what is past and gone?”

“Well, I wonder you can make so light of what broke father’s heart, and made us all a byword to our neighbours,” returned Susan defiantly.

“Miss Redd,” said Cecily, suddenly recovering her self-possession, “will you kindly leave your sister and me alone for a few minutes? I wish to speak to her in private.”

Cowed by the authoritativeness of her lodger’s tone and manner, Miss Susan went muttering out of the room, and banged the door behind her.

“Now,” said Cecily, turning to Rhoda, who stood before her with bent head and downcast eyes, “tell me what all this means. What is Mr. Dormer to you?”

“I suppose it’s no use trying to hide it from you now,” said Rhoda slowly. “You have heard too much to rest satisfied without hearing more. But, remember, it all happened long before Miles—Mr. Dormer knew you. It is an old story now.”

“What is an old story now?” asked Cecily, with-

out noticing the allusion to her own relations with Miles.

“Well, that when he got better of his illness, and was going back to London Mr. Dormer asked me to go with him, and—and I went.”

“Miles was your lover?” murmured Cecily in scarcely audible tones.

“I suppose he must have been fond of me in a way. You see he was still weak and ailing, and he had got used to me. I understood how to take care of him and make him comfortable.”

“And you loved him?”

“I would have given my life for him if it would have done him any good,” replied Rhoda simply. “I did more than that; I sacrificed father, mother, home and good name for him. They said the shame broke father’s heart when I went away. He took no more interest in anything, and let the farm go to ruin, so that it had to be sold when he died. He forgave me at the last, though, and when mother was dying she would have nobody but me to nurse her.”

“And Miles?” put in Cecily impatiently, for she could attend to no other part of the story. “You lived with Miles?”

“He took a little house for me near Bedford Park,”

went on Rhoda, "and though he kept on his chambers in town he spent most of his spare time with me. In the summer we went away somewhere into the country. Ah, I know it was selfish and wicked, but I was very happy all the same. People tell lies when they say you can't be happy unless you're good. The knowledge that you are sacrificing your very soul to your lover makes your love all the stronger, and your happiness all the deeper. And then you don't know what it is, ma'am, for a girl who has only associated with common men to have a gentleman for a lover. All a gentleman's little ways, his talk, his politeness, the very tones of his voice have more power over her than ever his money could have."

"But how—how long?" gasped Cecily.

"We were together, off and on, for nearly three years. Of course, I knew it couldn't last. I knew he would tire of me, sooner or later, because I wasn't a lady, nor educated enough to be a companion to him. But he was very good to me from first to last. He was working hard at his newspaper and play-writing at that time, and he used to say that it rested him to come home to some one who was not clever in a book-learned way. But the third winter he came less and less often, and I could see that he was beginning to

weary of me. He was stronger in health then, and so he didn't need me to look after him and take care of him any more. When I saw how it was I said we had better part, and though he was angry at first he came round after a bit, and said I must do as I pleased."

"How long ago?" asked Cecily.

"Five years. He wanted me to keep the house on and take an allowance from him, but I said I would rather do something to earn my living and help my sister, because the home was broken up by that time. So he set me up in this house, and he has always been ready to help me if I was in any difficulty. He came down here only last winter to settle a trouble with the landlord. That was when I first saw you. I knew he had his wife with him, and I went to the station and saw you go away. There was no doubt about his being in love with you, ma'am, and I'm sure he'd make a good husband to a lady like you, who could talk to him and understand all he was thinking about."

Cecily made no reply. She was sitting quite still, with a strange inward look in her eyes.

"You won't let what I have told you set you against him, will you?" pleaded Rhoda. "He's not a bad man, you know, not like some of them. He was kind to me even after he was tired of me, when many men would

have turned me into the streets, and never cared what became of me. You won't be hard on him, will you, dear ma'am? because I'm sure you love each other, and there's the child coming and all. Say you will forgive him."

To Rhoda's consternation Cecily suddenly broke into a wild peal of laughter.

"Forgive him!" she cried. "Don't you know that he thinks himself the ninety-and-nine just persons who need no forgiveness rolled into one? He is the lineal descendant of the prodigal's blameless elder brother, and of the Pharisee who thanked Heaven that he was not as other men were. If he had been present when the woman taken in adultery was brought before Christ he would not have hesitated to cast the first stone."

Her speech was interrupted by another uncontrollable spasm of laughter, while Rhoda stood by in silent dismay.

"Oh, he is a model of masculine virtue," went on Cecily as soon as she had recovered her breath. "I have always looked up to him as a saint and a hero, and meekly borne all his anger and contempt because I felt that I was unworthy of such a piece of perfection. And I have been trying to improve myself so as to become more worthy of him, and even looking forward

cheerfully to the pains of hell because I hoped that the child would bring us together again. It is all so funny, I believe it will kill me with laughing. Oh, Rhoda, I can't stop laughing. Help me—I can't get my breath—I am going to die!”

CHAPTER XXI.

MILES set out upon his travels with a heavy heart, which he fondly hoped would become lighter when he had put a few thousand miles between himself and the scene of his misfortunes. But it soon became apparent to him that, travel as far and as fast as he would whether by rail, coach, or steamer, he could not out-distance memory nor leave thought behind. After the close companionship in which he had lived during the past year, solitude seemed a strange and dismal thing, and he found himself continually comparing his present experiences with those of his last tour, when his pleasure in beautiful landscapes or ancient buildings, and his interest in quaint customs or types of character, had been more than doubled by the fact that they were shared with his wife.

And yet his loneliness was not the worst of his sorrows. As a murderer is sometimes haunted by the apparition of his victim, so Miles was haunted, waking

and sleeping, by Cecily's eyes and Cecily's voice. Night after night he endured the Tantalus sufferings of the widower,

" When he sees
A late-lost form that sleep reveals,
And moves his doubtful arms, and feels
Her place is empty."

He decided at length that he wanted a companion, that it was always a mistake for a man to travel alone. Accordingly, he persuaded an acquaintance whom he had met at Christiana to accompany him on a trip to the land of the midnight sun. But the travelling companion turned out a most disappointing failure. He had always seemed a good enough fellow during casual interviews at the club, but now Miles discovered him to be a little dense, more than a little selfish, strangely unsympathetic, and possessed of several irritating tricks. A hundred times a day he caught himself comparing his present companion with his former one, who was never dense, never selfish, who always entered into her husband's interests, and had no fidgety tricks.

As the sense of blank grew and deepened Miles's resentment against his wife gradually cooled, and the wound to his vanity began to heal. When he left England he had set no limit in his own mind to the

period over which his absence should be prolonged. But now as time passed on, and the tugging at his heart-strings grew ever more intolerable, he began to ask himself whether he had not been just a little hard upon his wife, who might not be the white-souled saint he once had thought her, but whose love it was impossible to doubt, and who held his peace and happiness in her hand. Of course she had been thoughtless and imprudent, but her girlish crimes grew less black with every hour that he spent away from her. It became so easy to find excuses for her too. She had no mother, poor child; she had grown up in a fast set; her sisters had set her a bad example. He himself was partly to blame, no doubt; he had expected too much, had fancied that his wife must needs be a faultless paragon instead of a creature of ordinary flesh and blood. But had not her punishment lasted long enough; would she not by this time have learnt a salutary lesson? Presently this vague questioning resolved itself into a determination to return to London at the end of three months from the day on which he had quitted it, and straightway to reconcile himself with his wife. Perhaps he would have gone at once if it had not been for his comfortable conviction that he would find no difficulty in making his peace with

Cecily, that he had only to whistle to her and she would fly to his arms like a bird at the voice of the charmer.

By the exercise of a vast amount of resolution and self-control, Miles succeeded in remaining abroad for the full period of three months, and only set foot in England on the exact day that he had fixed for his return. His heart felt as light as a boy's when he found himself once more in London, and even the sight of his own empty house and shrouded furniture had no power to damp his delight at the thought that soon he would clasp his forgiven wife in his arms. His feelings of happy anticipation received a sudden check, however, when he learnt that no news had been received of Cecily either by her sister or his bankers. His spirits sank as he realised that it might not be such an easy matter to recall the exile after all.

He shrank from the idea of employing an agent to discover his wife's hiding-place, and after a few days spent in fruitless inquiries, he chose the lesser evil of putting an advertisement in the daily papers requesting C. D. to communicate with M. D. The advertisement appeared between an appeal for the return of a fox-terrier answering to the name of Spot, and an offer of five pounds reward for a diamond star dropped in the

promenade of the Alhambra. The whole proceeding offended his taste, and reminded him of an incident in his literary bugbear, a sensation novel; but, failing a detective, he did not see what else could be done.

Two days passed, during which he awaited the arrival of every post with heart-sick longing, but no answer came to his advertisement. On the third morning, as he was sitting alone in his study trying to forget his anxiety over the reading of proofs, the caretaker put her untidy head in at the door, and announced:

“A lady to see you, sir.”

Miles sprang to his feet and hurried forward with eager face and outstretched hands, but he stopped short in bitter disappointment as Mrs. Marchmont entered the room. The next moment, however, it occurred to him that his visitor might have brought some tidings of his wife, but this hope too was speedily dispelled, for Mrs. Marchmont, without noticing the hand he offered her, demanded sternly:

“What have you done with Cecily?”

Miles’s face fell as he stammered out:—

“You don’t know where she is then?”

“I! No, I know nothing. We only returned to town yesterday, and I was told that you had left your

wife. Do you mean to say that you don't know what has become of her?"

"No," replied Miles, trying to meet her eyes. "But I am looking for her. I have put an advertisement in the paper asking her to return."

"How noble of you," said Mrs. Marchmont contemptuously. "Of course I know nothing of the reasons of your separation, but I take it for granted that Cecily did not leave you of her own accord. When last I saw her she was perfectly infatuated about you."

"No, it was my doing," replied Miles gloomily. "There were reasons—I thought it better we should part, at least for a time."

"You thought it better," repeated his visitor with ironical emphasis. "Oh, I have no doubt your reasons for casting off your wife were excellent. I suppose she had committed the crime of not admiring you sufficiently, or perhaps she had refused to give up some old friend at your bidding."

"I don't know what right you have to speak to me like that," said Miles. "I did not cast my wife off. I told her she could remain here while I was abroad, or live where she pleased on an allowance from me. As for my reasons for separating from her I can assure you

that they were not what you so kindly attribute to me. Cecily never refused any request of mine, and she always admired me a thousand times more than I deserved."

"Then why in the name of folly and cruelty did you leave her?"

"Because I made a discovery about her, a discovery which will probably be no news to you. I found that she was not what I thought her, that I had been deceived in her character and antecedents."

"Good heavens! what are you talking about?" exclaimed Mrs. Marchmont. "If you mean that Cecily was unworthy of being your wife, that is certainly news to me."

"I mean," said Miles, keeping his temper with an effort, "I mean that when I married her I believed her to be a modest, innocent girl, but afterwards I discovered accidentally that——"

"Well, what?" demanded his visitor impatiently.

"That she had had other lovers before me," he concluded solemnly.

Mrs. Marchmont burst into a fit of angry laughter.

"So that was the portentous discovery. And pray, did you imagine that it was possible to marry a beauti-

ful girl of two-and-twenty who had never had a lover? Did you think that all men were blind except yourself?"

"I mean lovers whom she had encouraged," returned Miles; "to whom she had allowed familiarities that she should only have permitted to the man she intended to marry. When I questioned her upon the subject the day that we became engaged, she assured me that I was the first man who had ever kissed her, but long afterwards I learned from her own lips that she had deliberately deceived me."

"Ah," said Mrs. Marchmont gravely, "that was very wrong of her certainly; she had no business to sacrifice truth to love, and I don't wish to defend her conduct in other respects. She was a flirt, no doubt; all the Tregarthen girls were flirts, as their mother was before them, but their indiscretions were the result of soft hearts and high spirits, never of deliberate cold-blooded coquetry. Cecily had no one to tell her that her behaviour was foolish or worse, that she might be wronging the real lover of the future. Of course if you expected your wife's mind to be a piece of blank paper I can understand that you must have been annoyed to find it a sheet of manuscript scrawled over with the beginnings of half a dozen romances. I sup-

pose that the book of your own life contains nothing but fly-leaves."

"I don't see what that has to do with the matter."

"No? Well, not much perhaps, from the masculine point of view. But there are one or two questions I should like to ask you, and if you answer them truthfully I will promise to help you to get back your wife, which may not be so easy a matter as you imagine. Have you any good reason for believing that Cecily deceived you after your marriage?"

"No; at least I don't think so now."

"Did she suit you as a wife? Did she make you happy?"

"She was the very light of my eyes," he answered, speaking as though the words were wrung from his heart.

"Have you missed her since you parted from her?"

"I have never had a happy moment except when I was asleep, and dreamed that she had come back to me."

"Then, you poor fool, why did you throw away such a priceless treasure? When a human being steps out from the indifferent crowds around us, and bestows upon us a faithful and unselfish love, what are we,

even the best of us, that we should despise that being because he or she is only human, and reject the love because the lover is not immaculate?"

She paused, but Miles did not answer for a moment.

"I am doing my best to find her," he said at length.

"Yes, but how do you know that you may not be too late? She may have discovered that it was not you she loved but an ideal of her own creation, or she may have given the affection that you threw away to one who would value it more, or—or she may have died in exile."

"Don't—don't," exclaimed Miles, springing to his feet. "How can you torture me with such cruel words? If you have any friendship for her, any pity for me, help me to find her."

"I'll do my best," said Mrs. Marchmont. "But I must know exactly how the case stands. You say Cecily had money when she went away?"

"Yes, a hundred pounds. It was to be her first quarter's allowance."

"And she took it without protest though you had shown her that you thought her unfit to be your wife?"

“She took the money.”

“Then now I am sure of something that I suspected before. Cecily would have starved sooner than take you money if she had had only herself to think of.”

Miles stared for a moment in blank bewilderment.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Then a light seemed to break in upon him, for in an instant his face turned grey and haggard like the face of a man who has received a mortal blow.

“My God! what have I done?” he cried, putting his hands to his head. “What have I done?”

“You have left the woman you promised to love and cherish to bear her trial alone among strangers; denied her the protection and tenderness that only the most degraded of mankind refuses to his wife at such a time.”

“But I never knew—I never suspected it. My poor darling, why didn't she tell me? And she always dreaded it—she shrank from suffering; but I meant to make up to her for everything by my love, by my devotion. And I always have loved her; it was my cursed pride and folly that drove me away from her. But the thought of her followed me wherever I went; I could not escape from it, and now I shall never rest, never

know peace or happiness again until I have found her. Tell me what I must do," he demanded, turning upon his visitor. "I can't wait any longer—I must go to her at once."

"Well, if you have heard nothing from her by to-morrow I don't see what you can do but employ a detective to find her. It is the quickest and surest way. Let me know as soon as you have tidings of her, and, if you wish it, I will go with you to fetch her. She may be glad of a woman friend."

"Thank you," he murmured brokenly. "You are very good; I am sorry I judged you harshly before. But if any harm has come to my darling, my bitterest enemy need wish me no worse punishment."

"Oh, we mustn't anticipate evil," said Mrs. Marchmont. "Cecily is young and strong. There is no reason to fear that anything worse than suffering has befallen her, and that is never supposed to harm a woman."

The following morning, just as Miles had made up his mind to act upon Mrs. Marchmont's advice, and engage a human bloodhound to track the fugitive to her hiding-place, he received a telegram from Combe Cottage, Ilfracombe, containing these words:

“Come at once. Your wife is here and ill. R. REDD.”

Half beside himself with anxiety, he despatched a telegram to Rhoda to say that he would start by the afternoon express, and another to Mrs. Marchmont to beg her to meet him at Paddington, in order to travel down to Ilfracombe, where Cecily was lying ill.

On his arrival at the station Miles found his companion awaiting him, and the two set out together upon their journey with heavy hearts. They exchanged but few words, for Miles, at least, had ample food for reflection. First and foremost came the sickening doubt whether he should find his wife alive on his arrival. The thought returned again and again, however resolutely he might put it from him. Of course she would be alive, he assured himself; Fate would never be so cruel as to deprive him of her just as he had realised her true value for the first time, and was looking forward to a lifetime of happiness at her side.

But even if she were living and on the road to recovery, there was a harrowing possibility that her love and belief in him might be destroyed. What had taken her to Ilfracombe he could not tell, but it seemed only too likely that she would have learnt one not very creditable chapter of his past, and after his harsh treat-

ment of her own delinquencies he felt it to be more than doubtful whether her faith in him would have stood the shock of the revelation. Women have such primitive ideas about right and wrong, he reflected; they imagine that it is as easy to distinguish good from evil as black from white. Cecily was probably ignorant of the unwritten law, which ordains that it is a trivial error for a man to ruin a woman, but an unpardonable crime for a woman to be ruined by a man.

The "world-without-end journey" was over at last, and Miles and his companion drove through the summer twilight to Combe Cottage. As the cab stopped at the gate the eyes of both travellers turned involuntarily to the windows, and both drew a deep breath of relief at the sight of the unshrouded panes. Rhoda opened the door to them, and Miles was too full of his own absorbing anxiety to feel any embarrassment at this strange meeting with his old love.

"Is she——" he began in trembling tones, then changed the form of his question to, "how is she?"

"Very weak," was the reply. "But the doctor thinks that she may pull through."

"Is she awake? Can I see her?"

"She would like to see the lady for a quarter of an hour," replied Rhoda, who had been apprised by tele-

graph of Mrs. Marchmont's advent. "She does not feel equal to seeing you to-night."

Miles, who had forgotten all about his companion, stepped back, feeling as though his wife had dealt him a blow from her sick-bed. She must indeed be ill or changed if she were not equal to seeing him, her husband, her lover. At Rhoda's invitation he turned into the little parlour, and sat there while the two women went upstairs together. All around him were signs of Cecily's recent occupation of the room, her books, her work, a half-finished sketch upon a board, yet he had never felt so far away from her as at that moment. Overhead he could hear footsteps and voices, Mrs. Marchmont's clear tones and a faint murmur in reply, a murmur which made his heart-strings quiver and all his pulses throb.

In a few moments he was joined by Rhoda.

"I thought the ladies would like to be left alone," she said, "and I knew you would be anxious to hear about your wife."

"Oh, Rhoda," he said brokenly, "you were always good to me, though I behaved cruelly and selfishly to you. You won't fail me now?"

"No," said Rhoda quietly, "I have done my best for you."

“Does she—does Cecily know all?”

“Yes; I tried to keep it from her, but Susan let it out, and then I had to tell her everything. That was what made her so ill. Her baby was born dead.”

“Ah, then it was true. My poor angel, and she was all alone. No, not alone, but with a stranger who was kinder to her than her own husband. When was it, Rhoda? What does the doctor say?”

“A fortnight ago. He thought she would make a quick recovery, because she has a good constitution. But she does not get any stronger, and seems to have no desire to live. The doctor told me this morning that there were symptoms he did not like, and said something about shock and cerebral disturbance. He told me to telegraph to you on the chance of your being in London, because he thought that your coming might rouse her, and induce her to take more interest in life. She was angry at first when she heard what I had done, but afterwards she said it did not matter.”

“How did she take the discovery about—about you and me?”

“She laughed till I thought she would have killed herself?”

“Laughed!” exclaimed Miles. “She was not angry?”

“I don’t know. She laughed because she had always thought you so good, and had been trying to make herself more worthy of you. I suppose it must have seemed rather funny.”

“But do you think she forgives me?” he asked, wincing under these matter-of-fact words. “Do you think she will ever love me again as she used to do?”

“She said you wouldn’t think you needed forgiveness. I am afraid she is changed towards you, but the state of her health may have something to do with that. She doesn’t seem to care about anything now. If—when she gets better she will feel differently no doubt. I have always spoken up for you, and told her that you were not a bad man, and that anyhow she is married to you, and her place is by your side.”

“But without love,” groaned Miles. “What a miserable farce! What an empty mockery!”

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN Mrs. Marchmont entered the sick-room, she could scarcely repress an exclamation of dismay at the sight of the fragile creature with wan cheeks and hollow eyes, which was all that remained of the girl whom she remembered as the picture of health and overflowing with spirits.

“You poor child,” she said, taking one of the invalid’s thin hands in hers, “why didn’t you let your friends know where you were? I can’t bear to think of your having been ill all alone among strangers.”

“Oh, I have been well looked after,” answered Cecily feebly. “I have a regular nurse, and Miles’s first wife has been like a sister to me.”

Mrs. Marchmont looked perplexed. Was the patient wandering? she asked herself, or did these words refer to some mystery to which she had not the key?

“Miss Redd tells me that the poor baby died,” she said gently.

“Yes; but it was just as well, since she was a girl,” replied Cecily indifferently. “The world is so hard on little girls; it never laughs at their pranks, and says, ‘girls will be girls.’”

“So much the better for the girls,” returned Mrs. Marchmont, who had chosen her part. “They reap the benefit in health and conscience. The world is much harder upon boys, because it withholds from them a safeguard which they require even more than girls.”

She was silent for a moment, and then, as Cecily did not reply, she continued:

“You know who is here, don’t you? Some one who is very anxious to see you.”

“Oh, you mean Miles. I suppose I must see him to-morrow; it will be as well to get it over. But his first wife will look after him. She knows how to take care of him and make him comfortable.”

At this second allusion, Mrs. Marchmont began to set her wits to work, and by connecting Cecily’s words with some incoherent explanations of Miles’s as to the reason that could have brought his wife to Combe Cottage, she thought she had found the clue to the mystery.

“Your husband is very penitent for his past be-

haviour to you," she said. "And he hopes that you will forgive him, and take him back to your heart again."

"I don't bear malice," said Cecily carelessly. "I could not expect him to be faithful to me before he knew me, and since the woman he wronged has forgiven him, I am willing to grant him absolution, though he showed no mercy to me. But love is a different matter. I could love a publican, but not a Pharisee."

"You must not judge him as though he were altogether a responsible being," said Mrs. Marchmont. "Men, even more than women, are the creatures of custom, the puppets of prejudice. Strip him of his swathings of conventionality, take away from him the support of public opinion, and you will find the natural man but a meagre, shivering little being. But cover him up with custom, pad him out with prejudice, and he becomes quite an imposing personage, with small mercy for the peccadilloes of the other sex."

"I never thought that Miles was a hypocrite," murmured Cecily. "What right had he to be so hard on me when he was a much worse sinner himself?"

"The right that society gives him. And let us look at the matter fairly, since that is to your interest as

well as to his. How do we know that he was a much greater sinner than you? how can one sex judge the other? Has it never struck you that a technically virtuous woman, who has lived a fenced and guarded life, may, by sinning against the spirit of the law, be as guilty as the man who, yielding to temptation and opportunity, breaks the letter of the law as well? Besides, the fact that he judged you harshly is no reason why you should judge him harshly, since two wrongs can never make a right."

"I have said that I am willing to forgive him," returned Cecily. "But one cannot compel love."

"No," said Mrs. Marchmont, "but one may coax it and cultivate it, so that even when it seems withered and dead it may shoot up again into a goodly plant. Now I mustn't keep you talking any longer. Think of what I have said, dear, and tell yourself that there is still happiness for you in the future."

The next morning, Cecily being none the worse for her interview with Mrs. Marchmont, it was decided that Miles might be allowed to see her for a few minutes. When he entered the room, he was conscious of nothing but a pair of large dark eyes—eyes which hitherto had always lit up at the sight of him, but which now remained dull and lifeless.

“Cecily,” he said, kneeling down by the side of the bed, “I have come to beg for your forgiveness.”

“I forgive you,” she answered mechanically, allowing her fingers to lie listlessly in his.

“I was cruel and unjust to you, darling. I was blinded by my own pride and egoism, but I see things clearly now. I know that I am unworthy of your love.”

“Love doesn’t depend altogether upon worth,” replied Cecily, in a tone that struck him as curiously impersonal.

“Then do you think you will be able to love me again some day?” he asked, a faint hope rising in his heart.

“I don’t know; I feel as if the spring of my love were broken,” she answered. “Still, I pledged myself to take you for better for worse, and if I get well I will keep my word. I will come back to you if you wish for me, and I will try to do my duty by you.”

Miles shrank back at her words as though she had struck him in the face. Duty! What a cold and empty word it was compared with love.

“But, dearest,” he pleaded, “if I try to become the man you once thought me, will you give me no hope

that some day I may win back my lost happiness—our lost happiness?”

“If I get well I will make you as happy as I can,” replied Cecily wearily. “I can’t promise more than that.”

“You speak as if you had no desire to live,” he said reproachfully.

“I don’t seem to care much about it now,” she answered. “I have done a good deal of thinking as I lay here alone, and I have got rid of most of my absurd illusions. I have begun to realise that it is far better for women to die young than to live to middle age. You see, when they are girls they seldom have the chance of being anything better than fresh and pretty bodies. They are laughed out of reading, and discouraged from following any pursuit but that of a husband, and so when they come to middle life they are incapable of being anything except worn and useless bodies. If they marry, their husbands’ love changes first to indifference and then to dislike as their faces change with the years. If they have children, their sons grow up to despise them because they are only women, and their daughters leave them for homes of their own. Too old to acquire a taste for reading, or to qualify themselves for any useful work,

they are left alone to drag out a death in life. And things are no better for the women who seek another sphere than that of marriage. If they follow some profession no insult is too vile, no mud too black for the men of that profession to throw at them; if they remain at home and devote themselves to gossip, fancy-work, and district-visiting they are regarded as human rubbish—mere cumberers of the ground. Man is born of a woman, but he always seems to have done his best to belittle and degrade his mother. I begin to think," she concluded with a laugh, "that the man in the parable who had only one talent was really a woman, and that she wrapped it in a napkin and buried it in the ground to please her male relations."

Miles knew not what to reply to these bitter words. He would have found it difficult to refute her main statements, so he took refuge in some vague generalities about the decrees of Nature.

"Then Nature is a cruel stepmother to women," returned Cecily, "and we owe her no gratitude."

She turned her face to the wall, and Miles felt that he was dismissed. When he went down he found Rhoda in the hall with a little rosy-cheeked, grey-headed man, whom she introduced as Dr. Larkin. Miles waited anxiously at the foot of the stairs until

the doctor had seen his patient, and then he seized upon the little gentleman and almost dragged him into the sitting-room to hear his report. Dr. Larkin, a Scotchman, who had modelled himself upon Abernethy, was brusque as to manner but evasive as to matter. His patient was no worse, but her pulse was still very feeble. There were disquieting symptoms; it was impossible to tell at present how matters would turn out. Her youth and fine constitution were in her favour. He would be able to speak more positively in a day or two.

“One question more,” said Miles, as the doctor was preparing to depart. “Did she—when her child was born—did she suffer much?”

“She had a sharp time, poor little thing,” said the other. “I was told that she had received some sort of shock just before. Unfortunately it was not a case in which one could administer chloroform.”

Miles turned away with a smothered groan and hurried out of the house. For an hour or two he wandered miserably about the streets, jostled by the tourists with whom the town swarmed, staring with vacant wonder at the extraordinary spectacle presented by some of the “cheap trippers,”—the stout elderly ladies in deer-stalker caps, and the stunted anæmic-looking girls in

draggled white frocks and mangy boas. He tried to distract his thoughts with the humours of the crowd in the hope of driving away the vision that pursued him wherever he went, the vision of Cecily's face, white with terror and drawn with pain. For the first time he fully realised the nature of the tie that binds a man to his wife, to the woman who sacrifices health and strength for his sake, who risks pain and death for love of him.

When he returned to Combe Cottage the report from the sick-room was "Much the same." Cecily had seen Mrs. Marchmont again, but she had not asked for her husband, and now she was dozing.

"There's no need to be so cast down, sir," Rhoda assured her former lover, for though he had often wrung her heart, she could not bear to see him suffer without trying to console him. "When people are ill they often take against those they love best when they are well."

"Yes, I have heard that," returned Miles, looking into her face with wistful eyes. "And she will get well soon, won't she Rhoda? You will save her for me."

"I will do my best," said Rhoda, involuntarily recalling the days when Miles had looked into her face with much the same expression in his eyes, though the boon he craved was a different one.

When Miles, who had taken a room at the nearest hotel, arrived at the cottage next morning, he was greeted with the news that the invalid had passed a bad night, and that she was still feverish and wandering. She had been calling for him, but it was uncertain whether she would recognise him. He hastened to his wife's room, and found her sitting up in bed, a pink flush upon her cheeks and her eyes strangely bright.

"Miles, I want Miles," she was saying in eager, excited tones. "I am sure he would come at once if he knew I was ill. I do so want to see him again, and hear him say that he forgives me."

Miles, with a thrill of joy at his heart, advanced to the side of the bed.

"Here I am, darling," he said. "I have come back to you, and we will never, never be parted again."

The bright eyes rested upon him for a moment, and then a look of bitter disappointment came over the eager face.

"No, no, you are not Miles," she said fretfully. "You have stolen his face and voice, but you can't deceive me. I know who you are," she went on, shrinking away from him in evident terror. "There is a stone in your hand, and it is sharp and jagged. Rhoda,

don't let him throw it at me. It is the first stone—the first stone!”

“Oh, Cecily, don't you know me?” said the poor fellow, trying to take her hand. “I am your Miles, though I was never all you thought me. But I always loved you.”

“How dare you talk to me like that?” cried Cecily, pushing him away from her with all her feeble force. “You would not do it if Miles were here to protect me. Oh, I do wish he would come, I am so tired of waiting for him. I want to feel his arms round me again, and to rest my head on his shoulder. Can't you send for him?” she asked, turning to Mrs. Marchmont. “I am sure he would come if he knew how ill I was. But make this man go away. Don't let him stand there and throw stones at me.”

“Yes, yes,” said Mrs. Marchmont soothingly. “I have sent for your husband, and he will come as soon as he can. You had better go,” she added in an aside to Miles; “the sight of you only agitates her.”

He stole out of the room, and stood in the passage, close to the open door. Cecily was quiet for a few moments, and then the wailing voice began again.

“Miles, I do want Miles. Why won't he come?”

Hasn't he forgiven me yet? I shall never get better till he comes back and tells me he loves me still."

Presently the doctor arrived, and his face lengthened as he perceived his patient's condition. After administering opiates, and giving a few directions to the nurse, he asked to see Mr. Dormer.

"I can't conceal from you that there has been a change for the worse during the night," he said when he found himself alone with Miles. "The temperature is very high, and your wife has no strength to bear up against the fever which is consuming her. She may rally again, but I think it exceedingly doubtful."

"But you must save her, doctor," cried Miles, gripping the other's arm. "You mustn't let her die; do you hear? I have been a brute to her; I drove her away from me. And now that I have found her again, now that I have just learnt how to value her, I can't lose her—she mustn't die."

"You should have thought of all that before," said the little man irritably, for he had taken a fancy to his patient, and was annoyed at the prospect of her slipping through his fingers. "When you had a good thing it's pity you didn't know how to take care of it.

But as to ill-treating your wife, that's nothing to make a fuss about ; men do that every day."

"But will she never know me again?" asked Miles, paying no attention to the other's words. "Shall I never hear her say she forgives me?"

"There may be a lucid interval before the end, and then she will probably know you. Whether she will forgive you or not, I can't say."

Before the end! The harrowing uncertainty of the past two days seemed positive bliss compared with the terrible enlightenment of the present. Feeling that he would suffocate if he remained indoors any longer, Miles dashed out of the house, and speedily left the town with its shops and tourists behind him. On and on he went until at last he found himself alone on the edge of a cliff with the dull roar of the Atlantic in his ears. With Nature's usual lack of sympathy for human sorrow, the blue sky and sunlit sea seemed to be cruelly mocking his misery, and the very birds to be singing joyously, "Cecily is going to leave you! Cecily is going to die!" He tried to pray, but he knew not whom or what to address. It is difficult to offer up fervent petitions to a possibly beneficent First Cause, and he could hardly expect that a God whose existence he had always regarded as more than problematical

should pay any heed to his prayers. Besides, he had hitherto thought it presumptuous to imagine that the laws which govern the universe would be tampered with on account of the infinitesimal troubles of the poor little insect called man.

He threw himself down upon the turf, and presently his thoughts began to wander back over the incidents of his short married life. He had so truly loved his wife, had meant to be such a model husband, and had acted so entirely for what he believed to be the best, that it was strange the impression produced by those reminiscences should be almost entirely one of failure and mistake. He and Cecily had been very happy at first, it was true, but something told him that, apart from his jealous temper, their happiness could not have lasted, could never have survived the passing of youth, the wearing away of novelty, or the approach of the stern realities of life. And why? With whom lay the fault? Not with Cecily surely, for he had undertaken the conduct of their lives, had laid down certain rules for her observance, and those rules she had implicitly obeyed. He remembered how careful he had been to nip off with the frost of his disapproval the tender shoots put forth by her awakening nature, how ruthlessly he had extinguished her desire for

knowledge and work. But then everybody knew that knowledge and work incapacitated a woman for performing the duties of her sex. But did they? Was ignorance, after all, the first qualification in the *tête-à-tête* companion of half a life-time, and was a wasp-waisted fashion-plate the most desirable mother of a race? Then there was the woman's own happiness to be considered. He knew that he should have been utterly wretched in the life to which he had condemned his wife; he could imagine the sufferings that must result from the unsatisfied cravings of a naturally eager and inquiring mind, the bitter regret arising from the consciousness of uncultivated talents and wasted time. And what right had he to doom another human being to such an existence, simply because that being happened to belong to a different sex? Was not life for women as well as for men a many-stringed instrument, meant to be played upon and not locked away in a more or less ornamental case?

For the first time he laid aside the eighteenth-century spectacles through which he had hitherto surveyed the question, and determined to look at it fairly with his own eyes. The old and now discredited argument that might is right and possession nine points of the law, was the original justification, he supposed, of

the present state of things. It was natural enough, too, that the average man should have been tenacious of the privileges he had acquired by force, and bitterly jealous of any encroachment upon them. But were men like himself, liberal and enlightened thinkers, who uttered fine sentiments about woman's duties and woman's sphere—were they merely puppets who danced to the piping of their inferiors? had they been gulled into accepting as a sacred tradition what was in reality nothing but a vulgar superstition? Certainly the effort to condemn one half of the human race to ignorance and inactivity must have been but a short-sighted policy if the poet were right when he declared that men and women "rise and sink together, dwarfed or god-like, bond or free." In that case it would be truer selfishness to help the women up, to guide their feet into the higher paths. But then the ordinary man had no desire to rise; he preferred a comfortable mediocrity, and he took care that, except in the matter of morality, his womenkind should always remain a step or two beneath him.

Miles began to feel a humiliating suspicion that his own attitude towards women in general and his wife in particular had been determined, not by any high and holy principle, but rather by a stupid and ignorant

prejudice, the outcome of the short-sighted selfishness and petty jealousy of the average man.

Weary at last of thoughts that brought him nothing but mortification and vain regret he turned his steps homewards with a faint hope in his heart that the rally of which the doctor had spoken might have taken place. Cecily was asleep when he reached the house, and he was told that he might go into her room without fear of disturbing her. He stole to the bed-side and watched by her, as she lay in the unnatural stillness of drug-given sleep. On her eyelashes the tears still glistened, and a damp spot on the pillow showed how long and bitterly she had wept for the husband she believed to be far away from her.

It was arranged that Miles should sleep on the sofa in the sitting-room that night in order that he might be at hand should any further change take place. Being literally heavy with grief he had fallen into an uneasy slumber, when he was roused by a touch on his shoulder, and Rhoda's voice saying :

“Come!”

Only half awake, he sprang up, and hastened to his wife's room. Cecily was sitting up in bed supported by pillows. The feverish flush was gone from her cheeks, the painful glitter from her eyes, and her face

looked young and round again. She gave a little cry of joy at the sight of her husband.

“Oh, you’ve come at last,” she said, holding out both hands to him. “I thought you would. I have been wearying for you so long.”

Miles threw himself on his knees beside the bed.

“Oh! my love,” he cried, “you have forgiven me at last.”

“There is no question of forgiveness between two people who love and understand each other,” she said, nestling into his arms and letting her head fall on his shoulder.

“Ah, but though I loved I never understood till now,” he said. “I never realised how deeply I had wronged you. In my blind and stupid arrogance I thought myself justified in thwarting your most innocent and natural desires, and I condemned you to an existence that would have been purgatory to myself. I even thought you unworthy of me, though I am no better than a beast by the side of you. Even though you forgive me, how can I ever forgive myself?”

“But I know you didn’t mean it,” said Cecily softly. “You thought you were acting for my good as well as

your own. I suppose it is natural that men should believe the platitudes that the world is always dinning into their ears on the subject of sex, and perhaps it is impossible for more than one in a generation to put himself in a woman's place, and see things from her point of view. But you and I were very happy together, Miles, and we taught each other love. Nothing can ever rob us of that memory; we are gods compared with the poor mortals who have never known happiness, and never tasted love."

"And now we are going to have the reality as well as the memory," cried Miles, clasping her more closely in his arms. "To-morrow we will begin our beautiful new life, all doubts and prejudices shall be at an end for ever, and the prince will give the princess the half of his kingdom."

"Yes; to-morrow we will begin our beautiful new life," said Cecily, as she pressed her cheek to his. "But to-night I am so tired; I only want to rest. Don't leave me, Miles. Lay your head on the pillow, and let me go to sleep in your arms."

Miles obeyed. Cecily was soon sleeping like a tired child, and his own eyelids gradually closed. How long he slept he never knew, but he was awakened by a

strange sense of chill and desolation that seemed to strike him to the very heart. Rhoda was standing by his side, and when she saw that his eyes were open, she gently unclasped Cecily's hands from his, and folded them upon her breast.

THE END.

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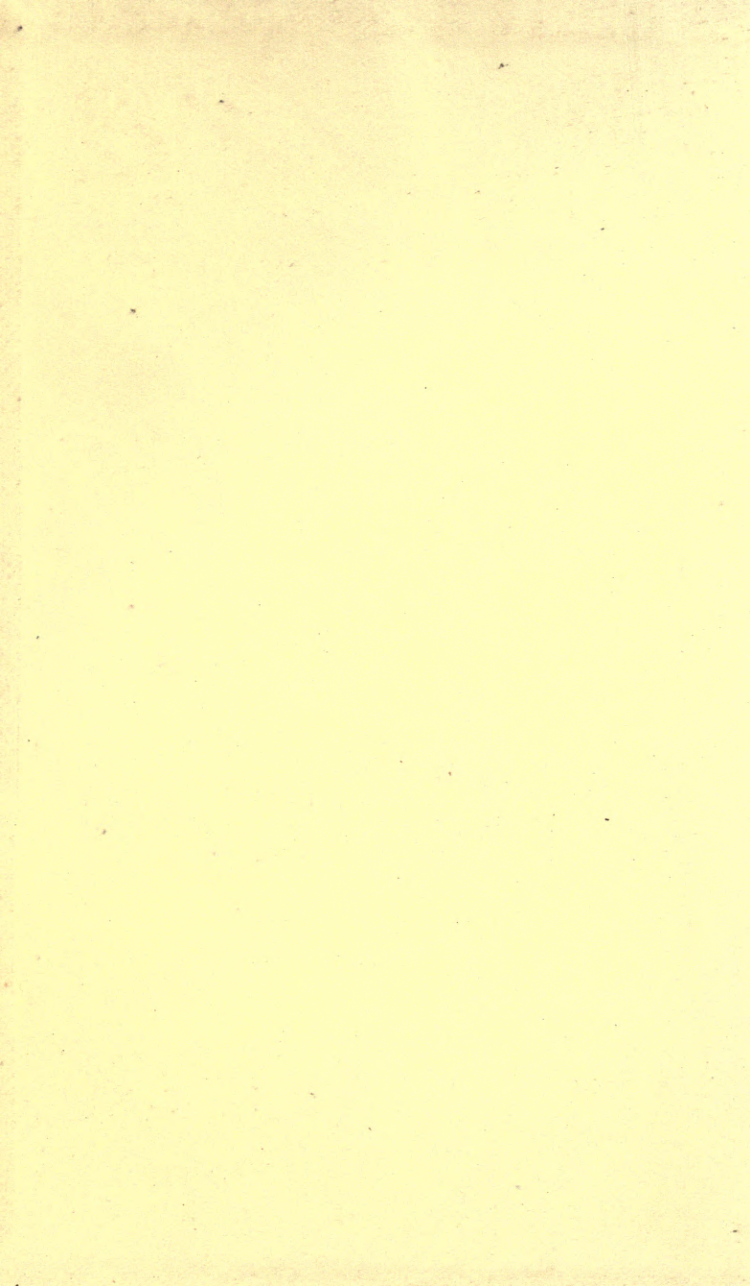
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